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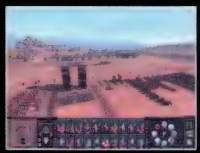

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Exclusive sneak preview of the rest of the magazine!

COVER RENDER BY ERIC BRIAN SMITH, XYZ3.COM

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COVER STORY

68 **Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars**
Command & Conquer returns! Ah, but you knew that, didn't you, smart guy? Well, this month, you'll get the full scoop. Learn about the third playable race, and read on as we battle EA in multiplayer.

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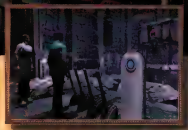

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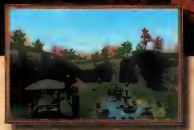

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XTRAS

THIS MONTH ON GFW02.1UP.COM

Two exciting contests for you! Win a trip to EA's Los Angeles studio, or a World Of WarCraft Collector's Edition box. Also, check out Ultimate Gaming Machines Living and The Burning Crusade beta blog.

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ONE LOVE

Or why you don't need to hate the consoles

On the day that I am typing this editorial (November 17, 2006), the PlayStation 3 has officially gone on sale. Just two blocks from our office in San Francisco, hundreds of eBay scalpers—*errr*, I mean gamers—have waited overnight to buy the shiny new machine. And in a few days, the same insanity is going to be repeating with the Nintendo Wii. Taking aside the fact that I personally would never wait overnight to buy *anything* (except for, say, tickets to a Jessica Alba–Evangeline Lilly oil-wrestling match), I find the current next-gen console madness to be a good thing, at least in the sense that gaming is finally, definitively emerging from the barrios of geekdom and into mainstream popular culture.

I know you might—given the magazine I work for—be expecting me to now say something here like: "LOL! These next-gen consoles are crap next to the PC! Only little kids and morons play console games!" But you know what? That attitude is just beyond tired. It's also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you've been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you've missed out on games like *Guitar Hero 2* on the PS2 or (I kid you not) *Viva Piñata* on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had in all of gaming right now. And for what? To remain "loyal" to a platform that doesn't need defending?

Here at *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* we are all hardcore PC gamers. We love this platform and we love writing about it. (My current addiction: Related Designs' awesome *1701 A.D.*) But this official title of ours doesn't mean we're blind to the world around us, nor does it mean that we're going to engage in bogus platform chest-beating. We know PC gaming is great. It's why we're here. But bring on the new consoles too, man. There's plenty of room here for all of us.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *1701 A.D., Age of Empires III, EverQuest I, Viva Piñata* (Xbox 360)
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

Sean swore he wouldn't grind to 70 in the *Burning Crusade* beta, knowing he'd just have to do it again...but dammit, the fool, he's doing it anyway.

Now Playing: *WOW: The Burning Crusade* beta, *Medieval II, Viva Piñata*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

Ryan thinks the Nintendo Wii and *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* are just swell. Oh, and he occasionally enjoys PC games, too.

Now Playing: *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* (Wii)
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

After blowing his mind seeing the Ultimate Gaming Machines up close and personal, Michael's life is now complete.

Now Playing: *Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

After a weekend of decking the halls with an OS that shall remain nameless, Darren took a couple swings with *Wii Sports*. He feels much better now.

Now Playing: *Windows Vista Install: The Game*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (STAFF)

Blame it on *Battlefield 2142*. GFW's resident FPS freak is spending the season with RTS and RPG titles.

Now Playing: *Company of Heroes, Gothic 3, Medieval II*
1UP.com Sioc: GFWShawn.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

So Rosemary finally found a real job...which pretty much ruled She's excited to be the new *GFW* designer and no longer a poor intern.

Now Playing: Her new hand-me-down PC
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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Letters

Because we always feel closer after we talk

LETTER OF THE MONTH

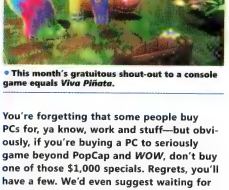
THE REAL WORLD

I love the magazine. I get much enjoyment from it every month, and the writing is witty and informative—often makes me laugh out loud. However, I do sympathize with the reader ("Computer Porno World," *CGW* #258, pg. 24) who wrote about his unhappiness with politics in the pages of *CGW*. Like many, I also use gaming as a break from real life. work, and the news. But most importantly, there are just as many other places to get that editorial comment on social and political issues outside of gaming. Leave such commentary to *Time* and *Newsweek*. Can there be no escape anywhere? So, let me say that I would also prefer if *CGW*/*GFW* stuck with the games and avoided the political pp-ed.

Andy

"I see gaming as a break from real life, work, and the news." We get a lot of letters containing that exact same phrase, Andy, so you're not alone—but we like to think gaming has evolved past being a purely escapist medium. The real world influences games, and games influence the real world, whether it's global conflict (look at Ruma Reality games) or an acute interest in xenomicrobiology (peek at *Spore*)—they're impossible to separate. And we think our readers would like to know what these external forces that shape their games are.

Check out our S.T.A.L.K.E.R. story on pg. 26 if you think we're bluffing.



This month's gratuitous shout-out to a console game equals *Viva Piñata*.

You're forgetting that some people buy PCs for, ya know, work and stuff—but obviously, if you're buying a PC to seriously game beyond PopCap and *WOW*, don't buy one of those $1,000 specials. Regrets, you'll have a few. We'd even suggest waiting for a *good* PC till things with DirectX 10 and Vista shake out. In the meantime, if you've got $1,000 to spend on an overblown console anyway, we'd recommend getting an Xbox 360—*Viva Piñata* rules. And we're *not* saying that because Microsoft's our official sponsor. *We are f*ing serious.***

Honk if you love capture the flag!

Well, yeah, we like *Unreal* as much as the next guy, and it made the next-to-last-round of cuts when we were paring that list down, but the deciding factor was that *UT2K7* looks like another (much prettier) version of a game we've seen a few times now already. We're more enthralled with games that seem like they're trying to break the mold—*BioShock* with its A.I. and atmosphere, *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* with its complex class-based team mechanics. Don't get us wrong—we'd love for Epic to surprise us...but what we've seen so far hasn't knocked us for a loop yet.

UNREALISTIC

I was shocked and quite disappointed that *Unreal Tournament 2007* didn't make your Top 10 2007 list (*GFW* #1, pg. 10). I was more disappointed when I noticed that there wasn't anything in there about *UT2K7*. Is there something I don't know? Is it not coming out until 2008? Do you guys over there at *GFW* even like or care about *Unreal*? Well, I've been playing *UT* for 6 years now...and I know that everyone in the *UT* community is very anxious for *2K7* to come out, so cut us a li'l slack, will ya? Give us something...*anything*!

Jim- AKA(FO)Maniac

OVERBLOWN CONSOLE

I swear, all I see in PC stores today are overblown consoles—integrated sound, integrated video, only two slots, 1GB of RAM, flat monitors worse than CRTs, and an AMD chip to heat up your coffee—and the neighbor's coffee, too. I have to ask, "Why would anyone pay $1,000 for a console?" Imagine when 64-bit and DirectX 10 finally come out...1 billion 2006 console-look-alike PCs will have to turn their virus protection off just to get the memory necessary to play games because the machines all need to be upgraded.

Chris "Please Pray for Us in Upgrade Hell" Snarski

THE FREELOADER STRIKES BACK

Right now the only link we have to freeware games in *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* is that measly Freeloader article that lists three games a month. *Three a month!* More than three freeware games a month are being made. And there aren't any reviews, either—so here I am, a cheap-ass wanting more. I wind up having to search the Internet for games, and while I'm playing them, I know that others don't feel my joy. Please don't leave out games such as *Chart Wars 3*, *GameBiz*, *The Ocean Battle*, *Freeciv*, or any others. Thank you.

Kurt Naro

After freeing the Freeloader from a mountain of Taco Bell wrappers, we showed him this letter, to which he had this to say: "I read this note, took it to heart, and by gum, I put *four* write-ups in Freeloader this month. No, no, there's no need to thank me. Oh, and thanks for the recommendations—looks like I don't need to do jack for next month's column now." >

MAIL BYTES

I was worried when *CGW* became GFW, but it all looks, smells, and tastes just like CGW... thanks for keeping it intact!

Adam Rubell

Civilization IV: Warlords didn't add any chicks.... When do we get more chicks for leaders? Come on, Firaxis, make some up, for pity's sake. I'm getting tired of playing Catherine.

Megan Crocker (aka PallyDog)

MY PC IS DYING BECAUSE TO MUCH DEMOS INSTALLED!

Louis

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• **Thank you, Kurt Naro, for this special preview of next month's Freeloader column.**

GAMER'S BLOCK

Have you guys ever come across something that could be described as "gamer's block," which I'd define as "the preoccupation with acquiring the latest top games with the intent to relive the obsession and progressing skill experienced five to 17 years ago, just to find yourself barely getting past the opening sequence before capitulating or losing interest"? I used to burn nights before work playing *Civilization*, *Railroad Tycoon*, flavors of *Dungeons & Dragons*, driving and flight sims, et cetera—and as much as I *want* to like the latest remakes or instances, I can't get into them. Here I am with disposable income and 10 new games, and I can't decide which one to tackle—and I haven't even finished more than 30 percent each of the last two *GTA* games. These are the coolest, most technically advanced, stunning games out there, and yet they lack something—unless I do.

Martin Mathis

Think you're just getting older, Martin. The fact that you have "disposable income" means you have a full-time job, and those 10 new games just sitting there unplayed... well, maybe your subconscious is just telling you your time's more precious, so you need to be more discerning about what you play. Maybe there's no room in your life for an 80-hour RPG campaign. Maybe some part of you is saying, "Why didn't I ever finish writing that novella?" or "What would have happened if I had gone to Spain with Delilah instead of buying that Pentium 90?"...and now it's *too late*. Maybe some small iota of your being is lamenting that lover you lost because you played too much *EverQuest*—a lover who now has a family of three and a series of best-selling children's books about a boy and his magical dragomuffin...*and that was the book you were going to write together.*

Er, we mean, yeah, games these days just totally suck.

WHOOSH

You claim many times in the first issue of *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* that you are not under Microsoft's thumb. So what do I find in the first issue? An article about *Halo Wars*, an Xbox game that will not be released for Windows ("Ensemble Studios: Bruce Shelley Speaks," *GFW* #1, pg. 34). Jeff, you are a tool.

Albert Macias

Miss the point much?

AW, SHUCKS

Congratulations on your continued success; the new magazine looks just as good as previous *CGW* magazines. True to your word, you have remained the same by providing descriptive and accurate reports related to gaming (and I expected nothing less). I have been a subscriber for nearly 10 years and always refer to your reviews of games and hardware before purchasing. My favorite features include the *GFW* podcasts and episodes of Tom vs. Bruce. If I had to pick a dream job, it would be reviewing games and hardware. There is nothing quite like having a job that doesn't feel like a job (at least most of the time). Kudos to all of you. I just thought it would be nice if the editors of *GFW* received some well-deserved praise instead of hate.

Ian Laseke

UM...

Hello people at *The Magazine Formerly Known as Computer Gaming World* (*TMFKACGW*). I have no food in my little cardboard box of a house. Whenever my *TMFKACGW* comes, I inspect it for all the glue on it. If I find some, I add it to my stash to eat later. Now, for the past some-odd years you have provided me with the glue, I have grown tired of the same old plain flavor. Can you please make the glue come in more flavors? Like strawberry, banana, chocolate, vanilla, or coffee? I and my group of *TMFKACGW* Glue Eaters need more flavors than the paper flavor.

Jarrod Jones, Leader of the TMFKACGW Glue-Eaters Club

Yes! Totally, we will get right on that. Strawberry, chocolate, praline, butter rum, apricot-watercress—you name it, we'll get it for you, yes sir. (*This man has our address.... Please, somebody, call the police.*)

WHY AREN'T *YOU* WRITING A LETTER?

I really despise a trend I'm starting to see more and more of: people who criticize game critics with the line, "If you can do better, then why aren't *you* making games?" The assumption that all game developers are experts on game design is laughable at best. The industry seems *full* of people like John Romero who were essentially just in the right place at the right time. I don't know how many times I've seen a game that would have been 100 times better if the designers [had] listened to the more critical gamers out there.

Aaron Edmondson

This letter is so full of clichés. The sentence structure is pat, the phrasing trite—"laughable at best"? His word choice is laughable at best. And the guy's name is Aaron Edmondson. More like...Shmaaron... Schmedmondson. Gawd.

SIX MILLION WAYS TO DIE

Just wanted to offer a word of encouragement to developers trying to find more than just "Six Million Ways to Die" (*CGW* #268, pg. 30) in gaming. *Indigo Prophecy*'s David Cage points out that now that he's 37, he "expects more from the medium than cutting off heads." Well, I'm 37, too. In fact, there are a buttload of us. The first generation of videogamers is ripening, but not diminishing. We—birthed by Commodores, Ataris, and ColecoVisions; weaned on NES and Sega; now settling into the glorious PC evening of our days—are still gaming. Now is the time for industry innovators to look to the maturing future of gaming and cash in on a market that will only grow from now to forever. Cutting off heads was a blast—now let's see what *else* we can do.

R. Lyon

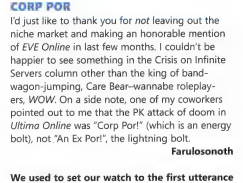
• **Kids these days and their shootin' and explodin' and their rat-a-tat-tat.**

THE SUN ALSO SETS

In your *Alan Wake* cover story (*CGW* #268, pg. 82), Alan notes that "the sun rises over the Pacific Ocean" and "sets over the Cascade mountain range." You should have labeled this a spoiler, as he is obviously delusional. In the real world, the sun rises in the east (Cascade Mountains) and sets in the west (Pacific Ocean).

Brian K.

We contacted Alan Wake, author of the story, for comment. He told us to beware the Crimson King, Blaine is a pain (and that's the truth), and that all things serve the beam.



• **Desperately seeking compass.**

CORP POR

I'd just like to thank you for *not* leaving out the niche market and making an honorable mention of *EVE Online* in last few months. I couldn't be happier to see something in the Crisis on Infinite Servers column other than the king of bandwagon-jumping, Care Bear–wannabe roleplayers, *WOW*. On a side note, one of my coworkers pointed out to me that the PK attack of doom in *Ultima Online* was "Corp Por!" (which is an energy bolt), not "An Ex Por!", the lightning bolt.

Farulosonoth

We used to set our watch to the first utterance of "Corp Por" in any given day's *Ultima Online* session. "Oh, must be 3 o'clock—the fourth graders just got outta school." •

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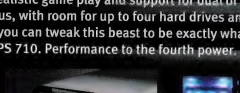

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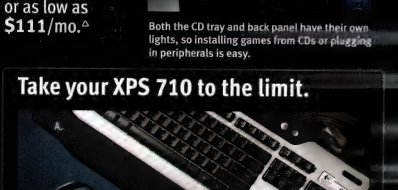

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Left: An abandoned Ferris wheel located in the ghost town of Pripyat, Ukraine. **Right:** That same Ferris wheel in the Ukraine-developed game S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl.

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ECO-DISASTER TOURISM

Exploring wastelands real and virtual in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **GSC Game World** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **January 2007**

PREVIEW

On April 26, 1986, a reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power station just outside Kiev, Ukraine, exploded, igniting a four-day-long toxic blaze that sent a cloud of fallout across much of Europe and the Soviet Union. Just over 20 years later, I'm touring the highly radioactive remains of Chernobyl to better understand a computer game. Yes, I know that I'm an idiot.

This much is clear to me as we enter the "exclusion zone," a military-secured no-man's-land of roughly 30 square kilometers surrounding the reactor. I suppose it's not a real no-man's-land, as several (insane) people work inside the zone—environmental cleanup workers, military personnel, and tour guides. Yes, tour guides. Our guide, an unsmiling Ukrainian dressed (like the other exclusion zone guides) in full camo and combat boots, could pass for a James Bond villain. A member of our party musters the courage to ask about his get-up: "Are you required to wear camouflage in the zone?"

"Uh...these kinds of clothes are, eh, more cheap than other clothes," he says. "We throw them away...after a time...because of radiation." Oh. Right. I'm an idiot.

Hurtling down a silent stretch of abandoned road toward Reactor No. 4, the site of the disaster, I steady my nerves with a desperate logic: "This guy travels around here all the time, and I don't *see* any festering tumors.... I wonder if he'd let me feel his thyroid gland?"

But before I can ask, I'm interrupted by a terrible sound: The slow and steady click-click-clicking of our guide's Geiger counter is picking up tempo. On the horizon, just beyond a manmade river of coolant water, the ominous smokestack of Chernobyl Reactor No. 4 comes into view.

"No more pictures now," says the guide, his chilly disposition cooling another 30 degrees. He tells us that, should we ignore the warning and snap photos of our approach, we will be arrested, our cameras confiscated, and our interrogation dragged out until our flights out of the country take off without us. All the while, the clicking accelerates.

In the days that followed the Chernobyl explosion, after the fires had been extinguished, the Soviet government jury-rigged a layer of concrete and steel over the badly damaged building, a temporary structure appropriately called "the sarcophagus." After 20 years of deterioration, the building is now structurally unsound and leaking radiation. Engineers predict that a small seismic event might collapse the roof, exposing the surrounding area to additional (possibly more dangerous) fallout. Needless to say, I can't wait to get as close as possible.

As we pull in just a few hundred feet from Chernobyl's rusted remains, our Geiger counter tunes into some long-abandoned radio station, producing an ever-louder static. Our bus comes to a stop so that we can get out. I'm practically banging on the windows of the bus, so eager am I to stroll in the cancerous sunshine. Yet, in this moment of mortal danger, I spot a Chernobyl >

I'M TOURING THE RADIOACTIVE REMAINS OF CHERNOBYL TO BETTER UNDERSTAND A COMPUTER GAME.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. IMAGINES A KIND OF ALTERNATE ENDING FOR THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER

cleanup worker, elbow propped up on the handle of a shovel so that he might better enjoy his cigarette break.

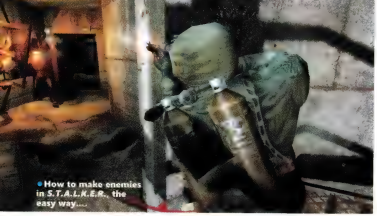
REMAKING A DISASTER

The locals seem fearless, which is exactly why I'm here. Along for the ride, some on their third or fourth zone excursions, are members of GSC Game World, a game developer based in Kiev. Its long-in-the-works game, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl* (which for the sake of typographic sanity will be referred to in the rest of this story as *Stalker*) is set in and around the wasteland of Chernobyl. I ask Oleg Yavorsky, the team's English-fluent PR manager who is visiting the zone for the fourth time, if he thinks getting this close to the reactor is, um, f**ing scary.

"Not anymore," he says. "The first couple of times were, but you get used to it." Surprisingly, his breath doesn't smell of vodka.

Stalker imagines a kind of alternate ending for the Chernobyl disaster. Set in the near future, the game describes a fictional (though apparently plausible, judging by the state of the reactor) second explosion, one which transforms the area into an environment even more hostile to life. When researchers sent into the zone to investigate the incident never come back, the government seals off the area with a military force. Motivated by curiosity and financial reward, adventurous scavengers called (wait for it...) Stalkers begin entering the zone illegally. You play as one such character, a Stalker whose memories have been (conveniently) erased, a blank slate to fill with the mysterious details you encounter along the way.

The central mystery, however, is how *Stalker* has required so much time to complete. First announced in 2001, the game hit several speed bumps along its five-year-long development. When asked about the delay, *Stalker*'s project lead Anton Bolshakov faults the game's ambitious simulation aspects and a last-minute revision to add storytelling elements. "We decided to do a really huge, complicated game," says Bolshakov. "We wanted to make a game completely ruled by live simulation, the whole game. So...we spent some time making it and then realized that we [needed] a strong storyline inside the simulation. If you implement a game completely ruled by simulation, the player sometimes doesn't know where to go or what to do, so we made this mix between story and live simulation."



How to make enemies in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, the easy way.....

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. captures the desolation of Chernobyl's rusted wasteland.

Stalker is a difficult game to categorize, possessing shooter elements (the game is played in first person) and role-playing elements (exploration and a growing inventory of items are key parts of the experience). What ties it all together is the world itself, an enormous (and highly fictionalized) model of the Chernobyl exclusion zone, complete with its own ecosystem of interacting characters and animals. This is the "live simulation" aspect of *Stalker*, which Yavorsky describes as "an A.I. module that takes care of every [nonplayer character's] behavior in the game."

"NPCs do their own stuff," says Yavorsky. "They'll go on missions, [hunt for] food, fight each other, exchange and trade...." These interactions take place in the game even when you aren't there to witness them, but *Stalker*'s artificial society doesn't live in its own exclusion zone, free from player involvement. Throughout the game, for example, you can choose to make friends (or enemies) with the other Stalkers you come across.

"There are different Stalker factions," says Yavorsky. "All of them have a different philosophy. The player, depending on his actions, might join this or that faction in order to fight [alongside] them. He can play as a lone wolf. He can be neutral. He can be against everybody." The developers stress a complex intertwining of relationships, noting that in aligning yourself with one group, >

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you will automatically make enemies of their rivals. And in the end, the way you roleplay will affect the outcome of the game in a fundamental way, according to Yavorsky: "Depending on how you accomplish tasks in the game, you will reach one of seven different endings in the game."

TURNING GREEN IN THE RED FOREST

Hanging out in front of the radioactive remnants of a nuclear meltdown for too long can result in only one ending, however. I'm anxious to get some distance from the reactor. Once everyone has finished taking pictures (allowed from a single angle) of themselves in front of the sarcophagus as if it were the Eiffel Tower, we're once again off.

Ah, relief. I came. I saw. I conquered the most seemingly senseless tourist destination in the world, and I haven't even grown a hump. But my warm and fuzzy feeling of safety quickly fades as we pass through (more like drag-race through) what looks to be a normal patch of forest.

"This is a *very* dangerous area," our guide says. "The Red Forest." I wish the name had something to do with communism, that maybe it's the place where the disappeared have disappeared to. Unfortunately, the Red Forest was so named because a large concentration of radioactive material fell on it in the days after the accident. The trees of the forest reacted by turning a frightening shade of red. It's still one of the most radioactive sites in the zone today.

I try to concentrate on the invisible menace, to at least be aware of the risks I'm taking in the name of gaming, but outside on the road I see packs of roving feral dogs, descendants of pets left by the inhabitants of the area after the disaster. They look healthy. Actually, they look like they might eat us if we stop.... Even the forest itself, once shriveled and stripped of its chlorophyll, looks once again alive. Wildlife has returned en mass to the Chernobyl zone. In fact, our guide on the tour seems more concerned that we might run into a wolf than a patch of highly radioactive organic material.

This seems to be the focus of his extremely brief safety lecture as we pull into the ghost city of Pripyat. He tells us, basically, that if we dally and get left behind on our tour, he won't be there to fend off the wolves. Oh, and there's something about not stepping on rusty nails covered in radioactive dust. Sweet....

PRIPYAT, A MODERN POMPEII

Outside the windows of the bus, we pass blocks of abandoned high-rise apartment buildings. "Before, Pripyat was a great place, a perfect place. People lived well here," our guide says. It's hard to imagine. Trees now clutter the narrow font yards of the apartments, obscuring our view from the street. Vines crawl in and out of shattered windows.

We come to a stop in the center of town, an overgrown square where the town's shopping center and a building called the Palace of Culture stand. Pripyat features prominently in *Stalker*, and I can see why. Creepy quiet (we're the only visitors for miles), overgrown with moss and weeds, and ruined by looting, Pripyat is a modern day Pompeii.

We walk over piles of broken glass to stand in the town's abandoned theater. We walk over thousands of decaying books—many with stately drawings of communist leaders on their covers, to stare at the broken tiles at the bottom of an empty swimming pool. We feel our way through a dark corridor to emerge in a gym, one of its walls completely collapsed. We traipse through grass and mud to reach an amusement park, at its center a rusted Ferris wheel that has never seen a passenger. It was scheduled to open only days after the accident. I look at the remains of a set of bumper cars, rotten and overturned, and think about the more than 50,000 people forced out of their homes, taking what they could carry, and I wonder if it's OK to use such a place as a playground for entertainment.

There's nothing like being this close to the worst nuclear disaster in human history....

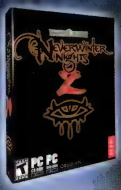
"The story of Chernobyl is quite sensitive over here," says Yavorsky. "I was a kid at the time when everything happened, but I do remember people with Geiger counters going around the yard where my parents lived. Many of the people on our team, their parents used to help evacuate people from Pripyat."

Bolshakov says that he and his team know to tread lightly: "We treat the Chernobyl tragedy with extreme caution, and we were hesitant for a long time before starting to work with this subject matter." He hopes to use the setting not as a simple backdrop but as a commentary on the incident. "We think that *Stalker* will tell much about human carelessness, which can lead to ecological catastrophe on a global scale," said Bolshakov. "Our game is a kind of hyperbole, an exaggeration. It is a warning to mankind about its consumption of technologies that are rife with hidden dangers."

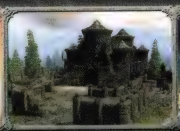
But even Bolshakov doesn't think that his team's creation will be able to fully communicate the terrifying sense of danger we feel in the exclusion zone: "Only those who have a chance to visit the vicinities of [Chernobyl], to wander through the deserted streets of Pripyat and literally feel this peril with their skin (as it is impossible to see it)—only those can be terrified." Standing in the eerie quiet of Chernobyl's radioactive ruins, I completely agree. **Robert Ashley**

FORGOTTEN REALMS

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2



EVERYTHING YOU DO HAS A MEANING



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	Mild Language
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ESRB	Game Experience May Change During Online Play

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In fantasyland, Edgar puts smooth moves on the girl of his dreams. In reality (below), he's constantly dodging his bulldog of a boss.

THE ACT

Catch it if you can

PUBLISHER: **Cecropia** DEVELOPER: **Cecropia** GENRE: **Arcade Action** RELEASE DATE: **TBA**

PREVIEW

Remember *Dragon's Lair*—guiding Dirk the Daring through a medieval dungeon stuffed with timed challenges, tapping a control stick in cardinal directions at precisely the right moment to move the hero along unscathed and progress through the rescue-the-princess story? Or Don Bluth's signature animation style and the arcane new tech called "laser disc" that powered the whole thing?

The Act takes this sort of simple-yet-engrossing gameplay a bit further. You play the role of Edgar, a wistful window-washer with a serious crush on the leggy young nurse who he spies through the hospital window he's cleaning. As it turns out, Edgar's a regular Frank Abagnale—he initially daydreams about winning Ms. Right with smooth threads and a smooth style, and ultimately winds up impersonating a surgeon in order to win her heart (and save his binge-drinking brother from "certain death" while constantly evading his fuming boss).

Edgar's wacky misadventures unfold via a series of professionally animated, timing-based minigames, all controlled by a small dial. Example: At one point, Edgar's sham finds him awaiting an elevator alongside a throng of doctors; dressed in MD garb himself, he's got to act natural to avoid arousing suspicion. Spin the dial to the right to ham it up and laugh at the other surgeons' jokes...or spin it to the left to play things straight. The doctors' reactions help you gauge your progress; the trick lies in the timing—overdo it (or underdo it), and the game ends.

And when it does end...just insert another quarter to continue. *The Act* is currently on a test run in arcades and cafés on the East Coast, with tentative plans to expand nationwide and (eventually) to the PC. The coin-op format fits nicely; the game's designed to eat up a good $10 for a first-time playthrough, and the professional animation and quirky storyline provide plenty of incentive to fish for quarters—at least until a desktop version arrives. ● **Ryan Scott**

> REMEMBER *DRAGON'S LAIR*—GUIDING DIRK THE DARING THROUGH A DUNGEON?

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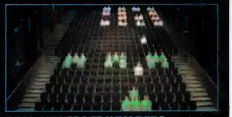
WARCRAFT III MUSIC VIDEO
Chart-topping Scandinavian techno act pops Cristal with ice princesses while playing *WarCraft III* mod *Defense of the Ancients*.

WORLD OF COLBERTCRAFT
Surprise: Comedy Central pundit Steve Colbert stars in several forthcoming games, including the gonzo *Escape from Skateboard Mountain*.



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KEEPING IT REAL

Military mods for the true war gamer

CULTURE

Peter Perla once observed that the games he loved were "consistently misunderstood, denigrated, even denounced." Nongamers looked askance at players who filled hours battling each other with simulated soldiers, tanks, and artillery. "Anyone who has ever been asked the incredulous question 'You mean you play games about war?' (often accompanied by a look of borderline revulsion) might be forgiven for a certain reluctance to discuss the hobby with the uninitiated," he remarked. But Perla wasn't talking about his overweening obsession with *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield 2*. Rather, this quote is taken from his 1990 book *The Art of Wargaming*, the canonical study of old-school board-and-map wargaming, played out with pencil, paper, and small model armies.

War-gaming has held a place in the practice of real military strategy for almost two centuries. Civilianized into a form of entertainment in the Victorian era, the pursuit attracted figures as distinguished as Robert Louis Stevenson and H.G. Wells, who filled their parlors with miniature troops and artillery, playing out little wars with fellow gentlemen. The hobby saw a revival in the U.S. during the 1960s and '70s with the rise of board war-gaming publishers like Avalon Hill and Simulation Publications, and some of the earliest games for home computers included the first strategy war games like Chris Crawford's classic *Eastern Front (1941)*, a World War II–themed title published in 1981. Fantasy role-playing games, which had evolved out of war-gaming, had an even greater impact on the development of videogames, influencing the themes and character structures of adventure games. Though some of war-gaming's digital descendents have flourished—most notably series like *Civilization* and *Age of Empires*—the more traditional noncomputerized versions today see fewer adherents, and they've largely failed to capture the imagination of generations raised on faster-paced, twitchier fare.

Board war-gaming and its face-to-face camaraderie may be waning, but many aspects of the old gaming culture have been resurrected in the computer-gaming world by a new practice: the burgeoning community of military-themed "reality mods" devoted to historical accuracy. Whether partial conversions of multiplayer war titles like *Battlefield 2* or total conversions of familiar foundations such as *Unreal Tournament 2004*, these historical war mods have fostered amateur development communities quite unlike the typical computer gamer. Obsessed with re-creating the most exacting details—a precise rendering of a 1940s German train's undercar-

Tripwire Interactive's *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45.*

***Red Orchestra* began life as a *UT2004* mod.**

riage, for example, or the proper epaulets for a Japanese officer in 1938—reality modders aren't just looking for engaging gameplay and a few fast frags. They're after something much more time-consuming: the rendering of historical worlds in as much detail as technologically possible. Falling somewhere between board war-gaming and historical reenactment, reality modders pursue re-creation as their recreation.

WORLD GONE MOD

A casual-looking guy in his early 40s who could pass for younger, StrangerThanFiction—who prefers to appear in print by his online moniker—lives and works in New York City. In his offtime, he works on *Forgotten Hope*, a popular World War II mod originally created for *Battlefield 1942* and now deep in development on its as-yet-unreleased *Battlefield 2* iteration. The only *Forgotten Hope* developer based in New York, StrangerThanFiction works as part of an international team of around 50 members, mostly based in the U.S. and Europe but spread out among 15 countries. "When I was really busy, I was probably spending 30 hours a week on the mod, at least," he says, "and a lot of people spend more than that." Of those working on the game, he estimates that "maybe only three or four are professional game developers or people who want to be."

"I was an old-line board war gamer for a long time," he says. "Long before I ever had a computer. I taught myself how to play [the classic board war game] *PanzerBlitz* from my brother's copy when I was 13 or 14." Later on, he played *Dungeons & Dragons* as well as "monster games"—massive board war games known for their complex detail and plodding play—like the Civil War title *Terrible Swift Sword* and the notoriously intricate World War II–themed *Drang Nach Osten!*, although the latter, he says "was a little too much." After doing some modding for *Unreal*—"just goofy stuff like mapping one of my bosses' face on a player model"—he approached the *Forgotten Hope* team as a prospective participant.

"Most mods are always interested in recruiting new people," he says. "They had an application process where they gave me a project to do, which was a texture for a Soviet KV-2 tank, and then a Type 94 Japanese transport truck. So I applied, and they eventually decided, 'OK, this guy is good.' I was just a texture artist at that point. Later on, I got a little bit into modeling, I learned to code, and I did some sound work. I'm a digital-graphics professional, so a lot of the skills I have in regular life have been very transferable."

The team communicates via public and private online forums, instant messaging, and IRC. Less than half the team is currently based in the U.S., with a significant number in the U.K. and Germany, and the discussions are based in English. Beyond the specifics of artillery models and tank >

> REALITY MODDERS AREN'T JUST LOOKING FOR A FEW FAST FRAGS. THEY'RE AFTER SOMETHING MORE TIME-CONSUMING: RENDERING HISTORICAL WORLDS IN AS MUCH DETAIL AS POSSIBLE.

A team of 50 war-gaming enthusiasts in 15 different countries united to create *Forgotten Hope*.

design—as well as the typical gamer-board chit-chat—the talk sometimes drifts into weightier issues. Players and developers trade tips on the best military books or discuss definitions of fascism; in one case, a debate ensued about how a Nazi general who disobeyed Hitler's orders to lay waste to Paris should be considered by history. A history buff himself, StrangerThanFiction says he has over 200 books on the war, including a number of Russian- and British-published collections of photos and diagrams of weapon and vehicle designs typically used by hobbyists who build plastic scale-model reproductions.

"You really need this kind of detail to re-create this stuff," he says. "I've been doing a lot of research into trying to get my head into the personal experience of different soldiers on different sides. What was it like to be in the Japanese army? What did you think about your officers? What did you think about the Americans? That 'soft stuff' doesn't play directly into the game as such, but it does influence my attitude about what kind of suggestions I make about gameplay."

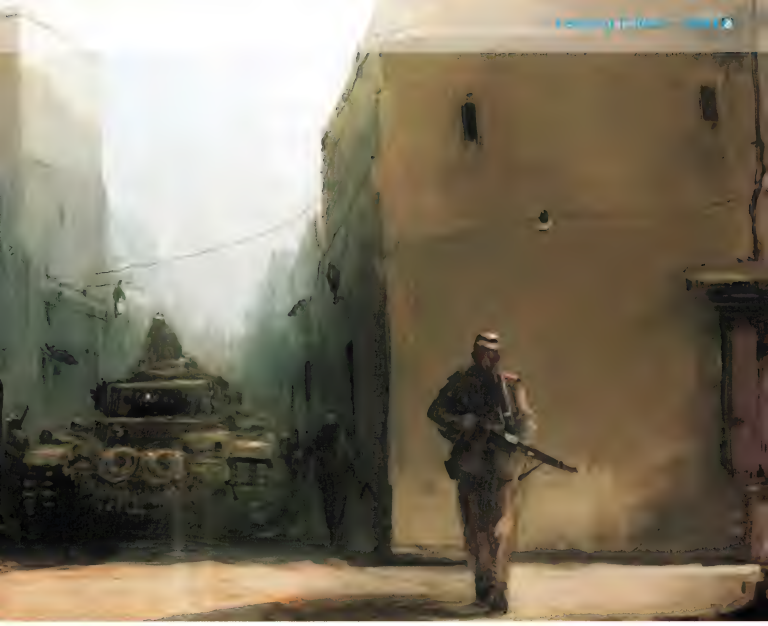
Extracurricular research extends beyond developers, however, to the players themselves. "One of the things that's kind of interesting about the game is that to be able to play effectively, you have to learn a little bit about the war," StrangerThanFiction says. "If you don't know at least what the stuff is—like what the tank that's coming to you is like—you don't know whether to shoot at it or run away. You have to know enough at least about the equipment to recognize it and know the appropriate way to respond to the threat."

HOW REAL IS REAL?

Board war games began to deal with a problem that has carried over into reality mods—how much historical detail is too much detail? In other words, how do you balance realism and playability? And what's does "realism" mean in any case—a preponderance of accuracy in machine design? Removal of typical HUD interfaces? High character mortality rates? All are possibilities that mods have explored, and each development team has to, in a sense, choose its own battles.

"People do have very different expectations of realism," says Alan Wilson, who worked on the *Unreal Tournament 2004* mod *Red Orchestra: Combined Arms*, set in the Eastern Front of WWII. Wilson is now vice president of Tripwire Interactive, creators of the commercial version, *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45*, which was released by Valve earlier this year. "Some people want it to be hideously complicated tank sims. Every button you push is right.... I was never interested in quite that level of detail. I don't want to go out and buy a special set of controls so I can have the cannon trigger under my foot. But I wanted to find a balance where all machinery performs exactly as it should. [In *Red Orchestra*,] guns perform as they should, tank cannons perform as they should—although we've simplified the controls so you can actually play it on a computer in an acceptable amount of time. If something is simple and natural in real life, it has

> "WWII IS THE EPIC STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL FOR THE 20TH CENTURY."
> –STRANGERTHANFICTION, DEVELOPER, *FORGOTTEN HOPE*



to be simple and natural in the real game. A lot of the simulations want to put in every single complexity they can think of."

Even if the best reality mods aim for better playability, StrangerThanFiction says that *Forgotten Hope* is still "not for everybody. A lot of people who enjoy *Battlefield 2* are going to find this thing excessively complicated, and they would be annoyed by the fact that if they run out across an enemy field, they'll immediately be cut down by enemy fire."

Another varying expectation: detail in the game. "Some people want it to add a lot of gore, blood, and brains, and I don't want to do that," says StrangerThanFiction. "Another argument is about things like Nazi regalia—swastikas and stuff. We don't include them, even when they were historically appropriate, for two reasons. One is that there's always an aspect of role-playing, and it's a very sticky issue with WWII. There are a lot of complicated moral issues. It's also a legal issue in Germany, where a lot of the developers and fans live. So we don't—we just leave them out. Occasionally, people come along and complain bitterly about this." In some cases, the most bitter complaints come from a small minority of neo-Nazis who gravitate toward reality mod—an unfortunate but perhaps unavoidable online side effect of the subject matter.

GREAT WAR—OR GREATEST WAR?

Forgotten Hope and *Red Orchestra* may be two of the best-known reality mods, but they're far from alone. Doomlab.com runs an ongoing poll of the top 100 *Battlefield 2* mods; a significant number of the most popular are reality mods. Though a range of contemporary and historical scenarios appear—including *Eve of Destruction*, a Vietnam War mod, and the famously popular *Battlefield 1942* Gulf War mod, *Desert Combat*—WWII continues to dominate as a favorite topic.

Wilson speculates there may be practical reasons for this. "I always think it's because it's huge and everyone knows something about it. The technology is recognizable without being too old. And trying to model a modern battle tank—they're very, very complex things! You realize that to do justice to 1980s onward, you've got to throw in radar-tracking of shells and god knows what else."

But the allure of the Greatest Generation has more to it than technical convenience. "I think a successful mod has to have a compelling story," StrangerThanFiction says. "WWII is the epic struggle between good and evil for the 20th century. Vietnam's a good story, too. There are a lot of good stories, but WWII is the defining conflict of the modern era. And as such, it's of immense interest for anyone who is interested in military history, conflict simulation, in war, in games. Most 3D games are some kind of conflict simulation—so we're doing the greatest story you could make a game out of."

"It was a 'good war,'" notes Wilson. "It's interesting for us—having picked the Eastern Front—that, of course, the Soviets weren't exactly good guys either, but at least we know the ending. It all ended happily, with the defeat of Nazi Germany. It led into the Cold War and a rather grisly Soviet Union, but that's ended, too. So it's all in the past, and we can all look at it relatively reflectively. It's a war we can step into and step out of completely."

In other words, pondering the reality of, say, the current war in Iraq might not be so fun. "It is, in that respect, much cleaner," Wilson says, "whereas the much more modern wars—the whole terrorism/counterterrorism thing—isn't clean. It isn't easy. There's far too much emotion tied up with it and the real world."

• **Ed Halter**

Steam powered: Valve team leader Gabe Newell (far right) and his crew.

QUICKFIRE INTERVIEW

Ten questions with Valve cofounder and front man Gabe Newell

INTERVIEW

GFW: Pundits compare Steam to Sundance, Amazon.com, and more. In what ways are these analogies appropriate and/or inappropriate?
GABE NEWELL: Steam was a first of its kind, and it leveraged both the independent and emerging online community. So, in some ways it is relevant. But that also dismisses the coolest part of Steam: It's the first channel/platform that allows creators to have a live and ongoing conversation with their audience.

GFW: Has vocal skepticism accompanied Steam's success (for example, in the way it has with EA)?
GN: We don't spend much time battling skepticism as much as we focus on trying to increase the value of Steam for both developers and end users. You really have to be determined about listening to your customers and making it better month after month, year after year. It's about being a butler, not a supermodel.

GFW: What are Valve's plans for less prominent Steam applications such as Source TV and noninteractive video?
GN: This is an interesting area, but we've got three games already in the queue.

GFW: Is Source a success as a licensed engine, especially in comparison to its competition?
GN: Source is something that's always evolving, both from a technology standpoint as well as from a licensing standpoint. We're constantly looking to incorporate new features and functionality and explore new ways of working with our licensees. In some cases, it makes sense to do the traditional type of licensing, so we do those deals. In other cases, there's a more interesting opportunity to pursue, one that allows us to work more closely with other developers with the hope of creating a more interesting end product.

GFW: Does dual-core processing empower you as a developer?
GN: The inflection point is at quad-core. The return on investment for multithreading for dual-core isn't as good as traditional single-threaded optimization. With quad-core and beyond, the only way to continue to scale up performance, and in fact accelerate the increase in performance, will be to multithread your game.

GFW: Have you considered outsourcing asset-generation work? Why or why not? Is episodic content a work-around of sorts?
GN: No, we're going the other way. We're not looking for the cheapest person in the world to paint a pixel, we're trying to find the best people in the world to create an experience. Episodic [content] is more about risk management and project complexity than cost management.

GFW: Has Steam effectively solved piracy problems for you?
GN: We feel it's more effective than anything else out there. It's certainly solved the issue of "Day Zero" piracy (after the game goes gold but before the product arrives at the store). And we have the ability to constantly increase that protection—even for products already on shelves.

GFW: Do you monitor developers you'd be delighted to work with? Complicated contracts aside, who would you invite to Valve?
GN: I'd like to work with Rob Pardo at Blizzard or any of the Arena.net founders. In ultra fantasyland I'd like to work with Brad Bird [writer/director of *The Incredibles*] and Shigeru Miyamoto [*Super Mario Bros.*].

GFW: Would *Portal* exist if you weren't packaging it as an *Episode Two* extra? Are there any other out-there ideas that you're interested in exploring as future "pack-ins"? (We're thinking of an earlier interview in which you mentioned elementals speaking to players through ordinary objects such as pieces of wood.)
GN: The ability to package it with *Episode Two* in the Black and Orange boxes is a product of moving toward episodic development.

Finding new independents to work with and combining new independent projects with our games are things we've been pursuing since [*Team Fortress* creators] Robin Walker and John Cook were young (prior to *Half-Life 1* shipping).

GFW: Have you considered canvassing the worlds you create and work so hard to immerse us in with advertisements?
GN: We are going to run some experiments with ads in *Counter-Strike 1.6*. We'll see how it goes. We're pretty sure we'll get a few things wrong at first. And there's a chance it may be a total waste of time. But there's a lot of logic to support the notion that advertising of some nature is going to be part of gaming as it continues to grow and grow. So, we are going to give it a shot, and of course we will manage implementation to limit its intrusion upon gameplay. • **Shawn Elliott**

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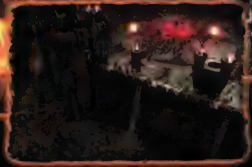

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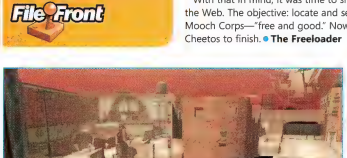
File Front

War. What is it good for? Well, let's see...only...*everything*! Take this morning. I caught *The Dirty Dozen* for the millionth time on TBS. *Days of Our Lives* wasn't on yet and the reruns of *Three's Company* just weren't cutting it—but that's beside the point. *The Dirty Dozen* did more than cement my Charles Bronson–Lee Marvin–Telly Savalas world-domination theory; it reminded me that just about every kick-ass game has a conflict where a moderate amount of ass gets kicked. I don't know about you, but right about now, I want to get my war on. And that's saying a lot—I'm more of a lover (OK, loafer) than a fighter.

With that in mind, it was time to smear on some greasepaint, tie on the bandana, and go recon the Web. The objective: locate and secure three games that epitomize the credo of the Couchbound Mooch Corps—"free and good." Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a mission to complete...and a bag of Cheetos to finish. ● **The Freeloader**



THE GAME: **War Rock**
FILE UNDER: **Battlefield Free**

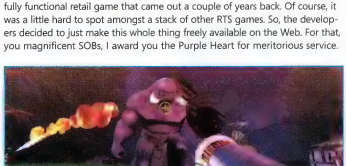
Something's wrong with *Battlefield*, and I can't put my finger on it. The graphics are passable enough, and the level design wor...wait...I know. Problem is paying to play. I mean, here's *War Rock*. The graphics are good (not great), and it can run on just about any computer. Most importantly, I satisfy my modern-combat multiplayer bloodlust without dropping a dime. As always, though, there's a catch: The base game amounts to an ongoing beta test. The developers are banking on the "your first taste is free" pricing model. Upcoming plans include a retail game with added play modes and weapons. Me, though, I'm perfectly happy with an open-beta freebie that liberally lifts material from *Battlefield*'s *Desert Combat* mod.

THE GAME: **S.W.I.N.E.**
FILE UNDER: **Hogs of War**

I love the smell of bacon in the morning. It smells like...victory. First, let me salute the soldiers at Stormregion. These guys got so loopy one night, they decided to make an RTS war game of *Animal Farm* proportions. Siding with an army of rabbits or pigs, you command and conquer your way through a full single-player campaign or watch the fur fly in multiplayer combat. Do you want to know what really makes my stingy heart sing, though? *S.W.I.N.E.* is a fully functional retail game that came out a couple of years back. Of course, it was a little hard to spot amongst a stack of other RTS games. So, the developers decided to just make this whole thing freely available on the Web. For that, you magnificent SOBs, I award you the Purple Heart for meritorious service.

THE GAME: **America's Army: Special Forces**
FILE UNDER: **Digital Draft**

Computer war games not realistic enough for you? Well, here's the real thing. Since 2002, my tax dollars—well, if I did actually pay taxes, that is—would have helped fund this fully free recruiting tool and game. The latest iteration, *America's Army: Special Forces*, isn't as glamorous as Chuck Norris suggests in *Delta Force*. However, it does give me a chance to become a Green Beret while slamming a sixer of Mountain Dew. Some will get stoked by using new gear—Javelin antiarmor missiles and CROWS (which basically is like playing a videogame while in the field. So, technically, this is a videogame inside a videogame—how meta!). Me? I'm psyched for the in-game virtual recruiting station! I get to fill out forms and join the online army? Sweetness!



THE GAME: **Savage: The Battle for Newerth**
FILE UNDER: **Fantasy fulfillment**

Savage is a little tough to summarize. Still, I'm gonna give it a shot. It's a full RTS game. It's a third/first-person melee/shooter game. It's a total fantasy mash-up. Oh, and did I forget to mention that it's 100 percent free? What? You actually want details? All right, the game works like this: You have two sides—Humanity and the Beast Horde. Pick one, and then pick a role. The commander plays the entire game as if it were an RTS while everyone else follows orders and fights it out on the ground. It's a cool idea, really. The first time your commander issues an order and you see him setting waypoints, you really do feel like a minion in a larger battle. If you don't agree with a commander's RTS decisions, vote him out. I love playing just so I can kick-start a coup in every match.

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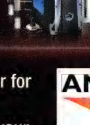

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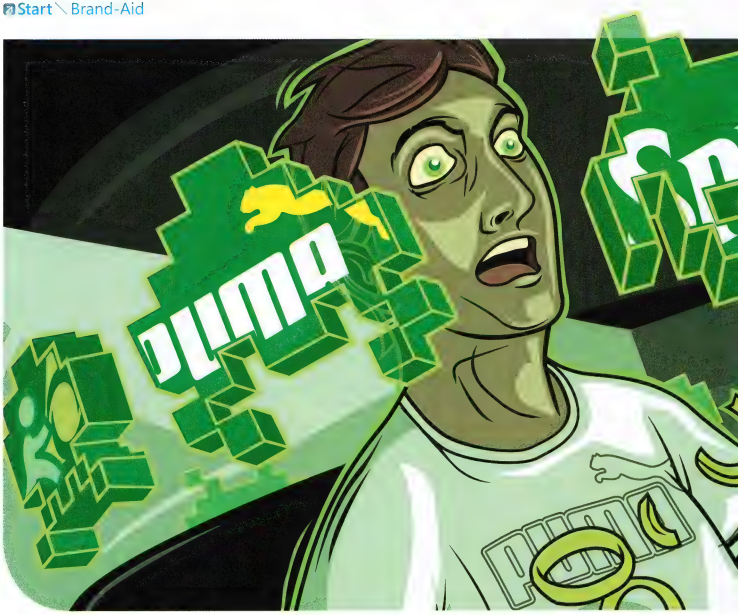


BRAND-AID

In-game 'advertainment' is poised to change the way you play

TRENDS

Picture your life without jingles, snappy hooks, or clever riffs, an existence where walking to and from your mailbox doesn't entail the use of cranes or forklifts. Hollow? Joyless? Over 70 percent of the U.S. GDP is consumer-driven, making life without commercials like a sitcom without a laugh track. Ads in all forms and sizes lurk everywhere, from the dealership logo you've yet to scrape off the back of your car to the terse text messages blurbing discounts at the bottom of your retail receipts.

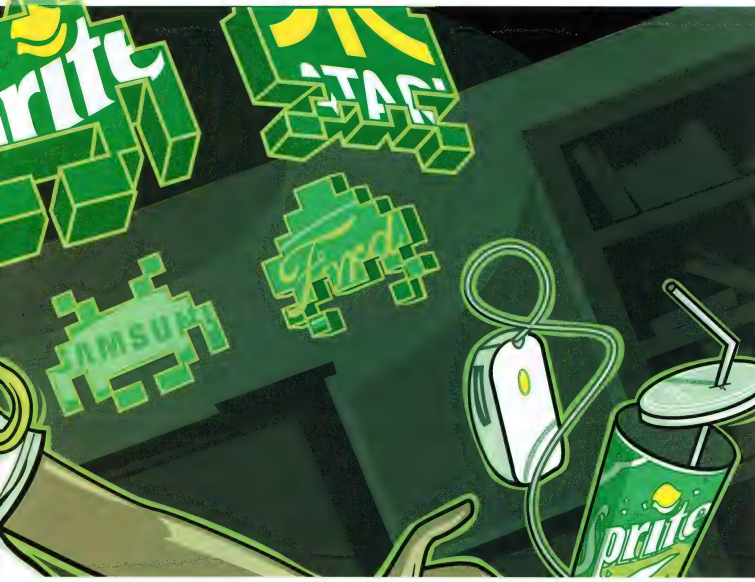
Enter gaming, rocking the entertainment biz to the tune of $7 billion in combined annual computer and videogame software sales for 2005 alone. TV today chunks at least 15 of every 60 minutes into clusters of 15-second hooks. Movies open with prepreview shorts such as student films touting Coca-Cola's "refreshing filmmaker" award. And games? The NES version of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was already pitching Pizza Hut on tiny in-level wall placards in 1989, and mega-publisher Electronic Arts' perennial sports franchises mime their real-world models by splashing polygonal stadiums, diamonds, rinks, and greens with billboards, banners, sportswear logos, and nearly any other merchandising parallel you can think up.

Recent deals between Electronic Arts and videogame ad providers like Massive Inc. and IGA (In-Game Advertising) Worldwide promise to hoist these conventions to new heights. But on its face, sticking ads for Subway ("Eat Fresh!") or Allstate auto insurance ("Are you in good hands?") in a game like *The Battle for Middle-earth* sounds at best intrusive (if not downright offensive). On the other hand, so-called "next-generation" production costs have more than tripled in recent years, threatening to hike retail prices past mass-market thresholds just to secure sustainable levels of revenue. Consequently, companies are trying to find a way to capitalize on the game industry's potential advertising windfalls—but can they do it without alienating gamers who want an experience that's streamlined and nondisruptive?

ADVERTAINMENT

"In-game advertising is part of an overall trend to reach people in their lives," says T. Bettina Cornwell, professor of marketing and leader of the marketing cluster in the UQ Business School at the University of Queensland. "Brand placements in movies and TV, sponsorship of sports, arts, and charity

ILLUSTRATION BY JOSHUA ELLINGSON



events, and all forms of ambient marketing are part of this trend toward embedded experience advertising." Cornwell sees several trends coalescing in the wake of expensive traditional advertising practices being outpaced by savvier technology. "The big rant about media fragmentation is real," she adds. "The best way to find your audience is within their entertainment, whether it be movies, games, or sports."

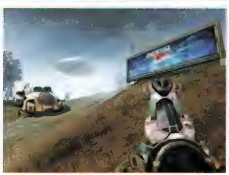
But delivering seamless, unobtrusive game ads is a brand-new balancing act in an industry that hasn't yet locked down the sort of standards common to older, established mediums. It's one thing to play *Lego Star Wars*, for instance, where stackable toys based on a film franchise pose their own conventions (heaping, assembling) as one of the primary gameplay conceits, but another entirely to slap Bionicle posters inside the *Millennium Falcon's* cockpit. The current debate in publisher circles seems to pivot on how to incorporate thematically related "drop-in" ads of a sort that risk marginalizing the escapist fundamentals of their fictitious environments, versus a more "integrative" approach—call it "advertainment"—where the gameplay *is* the commercial.

Recent studies by researchers like Nielsen Interactive Entertainment shed some light on the issue. One NIE study in partnership with games publisher Activision found that increased product recall for a majority of participants was tied directly to their sense that the product "fit" the game they were playing, e.g., banners on racecars or signs along freeways. The study also indicated—powerfully—that a higher percentage of gamers were more positive than negative about the products after playing the game.

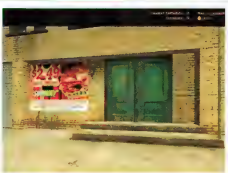
"There are plenty of instances where you'll still find fake ads or brands are being used in games, e.g., 'Goop' instead of Gap or 'Soda Pop' instead of Coke," says IGA Worldwide's CEO Justin Townsend. "The feedback from gamers in general is that fake ads are not what they want to see, as it detracts from what are otherwise very realistic environments. I've had the opportunity to see stadium games or racing games without any ads at all, and frankly, these games look naked."

Simulating reality is obviously a vital immersive component in certain genres, but games also offer something their spectator-driven real-world counterparts lack: interactivity. Townsend believes that interaction with a brand through product placement serves a different goal than ads displayed within the environment. "The purpose of concepts that allow a consumer to interact with a brand is to drive product association," he argues. "Whereas ads displayed visually drive brand or product awareness." In other words, using Lego Han Solo to build a minigun or some puzzle-solving artifice in *Lego Star Wars II* creates >

DELIVERING UNOBTRUSIVE GAME ADS IS A BRAND-NEW BALANCING ACT IN AN INDUSTRY THAT HASN'T YET LOCKED DOWN THE STANDARDS COMMON TO OLDER MEDIUMS



Sticker price: Ads in *Battlefield 2142*...



...and *Counter-Strike: Source*...

...and *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*.

(or enhances) a rapport with the real-world franchise, i.e., the "flexible, buildable" nature of the Lego product. Whereas a sign or billboard in the game pitching "*Star Wars* Bran Flakes" has no associative value, save to perhaps make you curious enough to go looking for (or simply notice) it at the grocery store. In either case, says Townsend, the key is ensuring that the experience be contextual and not disruptive.

PLAY AND GO SEEK

What about self-referential experiences where the game in a sense *becomes* the ad? "I think parallel placement or marketing communication programs with limited integration will continue, but the goal is clearly toward integration," says Cornwell. "Although the potential for integrated tie-ins does depend a bit on genre, it has distinct advantages from an information-processing perspective. With more elements tied together and self-referencing, the possibility of a strong, long-lasting memory for the brand is increased. Each referenced 'associate' to the brand offers another pathway to recollection."

Cornwell and a former University of Queensland student, Lars-Peter Schneider, copublished a paper last year in the *International Journal of Advertising* that considered the effects of experience and game flow on player memory. Exploring the impacts of various-sized banners around a racetrack in terms of recall and recognition, the study found—not surprisingly—that spatially prominent banners increased recall and recognition levels over subtle ones. But more importantly, the study also revealed that subtle banners *related to the actions of players* were also able to influence memory significantly.

"We call this 'centrality to action,'" explains Cornwell. "In-game advertising adds an element of interactivity; it's not just how big a placement is or the duration of exposure, it's how the gamer interacts with a placement." Thus, says Cornwell, an ad that's small in size but placed on a tough corner in a racing game may be remembered better than a large banner because each time a player takes the corner, the small placement is serving as a mental marker.

Lest you worry that "interactive" also implies "transactional," don't look for virtual vending machines in your games anytime soon. "Stopping to deliberate and make a transaction would definitely pull gamers [out] of the experience," says Cornwell. "One could imagine setting up account transaction details in advance so that disruption would be minimal, but this would have consumer protection issues similar to mobile gambling. Are people really in the right state of mind when playing a game to make these sorts of decisions?"

FOR LOVE OR MONEY

The greatest challenge facing in-game ads may lie in simply convincing players that ads are an acceptable way to offset spiraling production costs. "If it's well done, many gamers will accept some advertising for a well-priced game," says Cornwell. "Moreover, if the advertisement is clever, entertaining, and has a reasonable shelf life with regard to wear-out, gamers might even like it. On the other hand, blatant placements without regard to game context and flow will take a hard beating." Truer words were never spoken.

Matt Peckham

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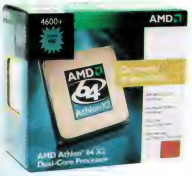

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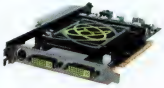

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Class actions

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Splash Damage/id** GENRE: **Multiplayer First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **March 2007**

PREVIEW

Sparta's phalanx halting the Persians at Thermopylae; the Confederate ironclad splintering sloop and frigate at Hampton Roads; Staudegger's Tiger engaging 50 Soviet tanks at Kursk—tactical, numerical, and technological gaps make for good war watching. Multiplayer shooter *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* applies the principle to *war gaming*.

Hold up. History versus fantasy? Sure, but the firepower freak who cites his virtual CAR-15's specs—30-round clip firing 11.6 rounds per second—isn't just flashing his *Soldier of Fortune* subscription; he's also measuring himself against AK-47-armed opponents (where the one is interesting only in opposition to the others). That same artillery-nerd factor holds true, fact or fiction, Heckler & Koch or hyperblaster.

"It was important to create classes that not only appear unique, but have well-accented roles and abilities," says Splash Damage owner and *ETQW* lead designer Paul Wedgwood. "For instance, the Global Defense Force Engineer wears a distinctive helmet and has mines on a belt harness—you can look at him and know how many he has left—whereas the Strogg Oppressor strikes a bold silhouette with the wing structure on his back. See it as a sort of communication array that animates up and into position as the Oppressor calls on fire support weapons."

We pull a page from *ETQW*'s imaginary military reference manual to study the GDF Engineer and Strogg Oppressor.

• **Shawn Elliott**

> TACTICAL, NUMERICAL, AND TECHNOLOGICAL GAPS MAKE FOR GOOD WAR WATCHING.

GDF ENGINEER

"A strong defensive class armed with either the N22 combat shotgun or N80 assault rifle with an optional 45mm grenade launcher attachment, the Engineer constructs objectives, repairs vehicles and deployables, plants land mines, and defuses Strogg plasma charges," says Splash Damage owner and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* lead designer Paul Wedgwood. "He also deploys and maintains his own defense turrets such as the Crossfire antipersonnel, Ogre antivehicle, and Guardian artillery-interceptor turrets. Crossfire and Ogre turrets automatically detect and engage Strogg infantry and air/ground vehicles, respectively, and can also be manned, allowing players to override automatic systems and engage targets of their choice."

STROGG OPPRESSOR

Says Wedgwood: "The Oppressor is the Strogg offensive fire-support specialist. While only lightly armed with a standard Lacerator plasma rifle, he can inflict massive casualties on the enemies of the Makron, bringing colossal destruction to the battlefield. The Oppressor deploys bombardment devices such as the rail howitzer, plasma mortar, and the terrifying dark-matter cannon, raining down fire on enemies by designating them with his targeting device. The Oppressor can also throw a beacon to bring down a catastrophic Violator orbital strike, a fearsome pillar of energy that burns across the landscape, destroying everything in its path. He can also drop a tactical energy shield to provide his teammates with temporary cover from enemy fire."

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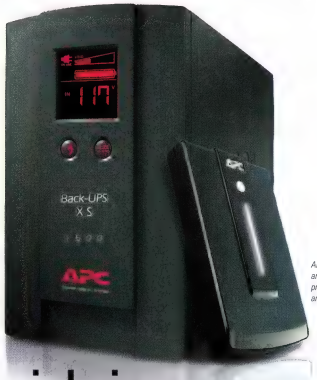

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Don't call it a remake—*Tomb Raider: Anniversary* is "inspired by" the original 1996 game.

"Putting things on pegs is probably not that interesting to today's gamers," says creative director Jason Botta—and so *Tomb Raider*'s puzzles have been expanded beyond their original scope.

TOMB RAIDER: ANNIVERSARY

In which boxes are pushed and a good time is had by all

PUBLISHER Eidos | DEVELOPER Crystal Dynamics | GENRE Action/Adventure | RELEASE 2007

PREVIEW

Remake, reimagining, reinvention—what's the difference? According to Crystal Dynamics, plenty—so file *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* (October 31, 2006 marked the 10th) under "original retelling," if you've gotta give it a name.

Inspired by, though not ripped directly from, the original game's giant ancient temples and box-pushing/lever-pulling puzzles, *Anniversary* fleshes out the first *TR*'s story (Lara's hunt for "the Scion," for those keeping track of MacGuffins) while building a new game from the ground up. Crystal Dynamics' directive: Take you on a nostalgia trip without tripping over the original game's out-moded grid-based level design and drives-like-a-truck heroine mechanics. Levels feature familiar sights and elements (from rampaging T-Rexes to ancient contraptions composed of cumbersome cogs and gears), but they've been overhauled to take advantage of Lara's *Tomb Raider: Legend* physics tricks and revamped controls. (To put a fine point on it, Crystal Dynamics tried re-creating a few levels from the original note-for-note in the *Legend* engine, only to find Lara could blow through most of them in quadruple time.) You still place that cog on that peg, yeah—but after the gears start grinding, Lara now pole-vaults *Prince of Persia*–style from gear to gear of the creaking machine.

What's most appealing to us about *Tomb Raider* is Crystal D's promised return to the original game's less-is-more philosophy of combat—to revisit the quiet expanses of antediluvian antechambers where it was just you, some perplexing ancient apparatus, and 20 minutes of nerve-racking leaps set to the stark lack of a musical score.

What's least appealing about *Anniversary* is Crystal Dynamics' decision to bring the game out for the PC, PlayStation 2, and PSP only. Without an Xbox 360 or PS3 version to drive the need for shiny next-gen-console graphics, Eidos has no plans to offer a high-end "Next-Gen Content" graphics option in the PC version à la *Tomb Raider: Legend*. (Crystal Dynamics admits it's also working on a "truly next-gen" Lara game, presumably/hopefully for PC, too).

Earthshaking it's not, but Eidos isn't trying to reinvent so much as reinvoke. Other sepia-tinged specifics range from familiar incidental melodies that strike up when animals attack to the old "ring inventory" system. The "new" *Legend* Lara model is even decked out in classic tomb-raiding garb, from tight blue leotard and butt-hugging gun harness to cute li'l backpack and fashionable braid. And really, that's the whole reason you read this article, isn't it? ● **Sean Molloy**

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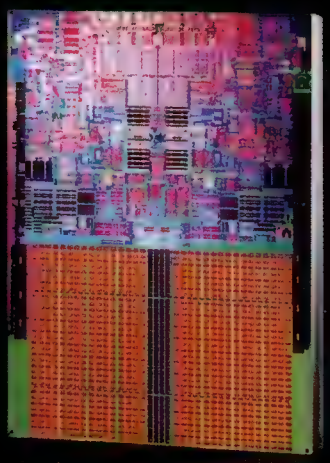

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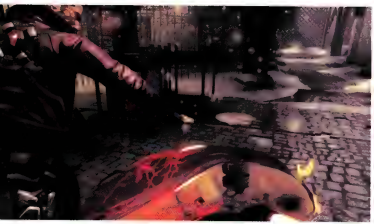
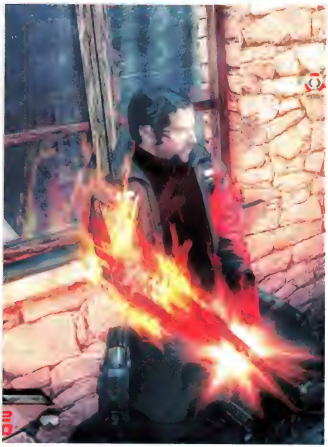
LENNOX ANIMATES LIKE SOME DEMONIC PANTHER READY TO POUNCE.





Fallen angel Lennox launches a posttelepor surprise attack.

INFERNAL

Part *Resident Evil 4*, part internal affairs, all hell breaks loose

PUBLISHER: **Playlogic** DEVELOPER: **Metropolis** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **December 2006**

PREVIEW

God works in mysterious ways—and apparently, he has a whole secret agency just to handle his earthly dirty work. Ah, but the upcoming *Infernal* isn't shaping up to be some typical goody-goody world-saving scenario. You see, you're not working for the heavenly Etherlight agency; you're a fallen angel and one of hell's newest operatives. The game's goal is to put the unholy hurt on God's minions and restore the balance. Someone call Todd McFarlane—stat—and see if he's miffed about his *Spawn* shtick getting aped.

Sparing most of the gory plot details, Ryan Lennox may have been Etherlight's top agent, but being a hothead ruffled a few angelic feathers. From the looks of the demo's dustups, Lennox's former employer is about to receive some payback.

No doubt about it, *Infernal*'s graphics are tight. The two-level sneak peek looks smart, and Lennox animates like some demonic panther ready to pounce: Crouch behind objects, post up on walls, or dive out of harm's way. The camera and style remind us of modern console classic *Resident Evil 4* (which, by the way, is PC-bound. But we digress...), while the unfolding action is strictly balls-out gunplay. Load up with some conventional gear—pistols, shurikens, SMGs, and shottys—or let loose with some ungodly powers.

The most mundane gifts are the demon's stock-in-trade flaming gouts that erupt from your hands. As you get more infernal, you'll unlock more abilities. Among the more intriguing powers is line-of-sight teleportation. By simply pointing the reticule and hitting a button, you can warp to another location for a few seconds before returning to your original position. It's perfect for hitting heavy troopers from behind. Another power worth noting is something you've seen before: telekinesis. Lift up stuff with your mind. Yeah, yeah, big whoop.

What *really* matters here is that the game uses Ageia PhysX. Brace yourself—a game actually built with the Ageia Physics Processing Unit in mind. Crazy, eh? Well, in early tests, we've seen curtains of floating dust mites in what must be the mustiest cloister this side of Vatican City. Debris, flammable barrels—but it's nothing you can't already see in Havok's software-based physics. Here's hoping the pyrotechnics will get cranked up to justify Ageia's pricey peripheral.

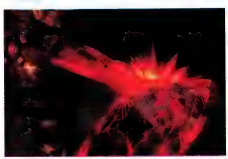
Speaking of "cranked," the angelic agents of Etherlight might need to get their heads screwed on straight. In our playthrough, the enemy A.I. had moments of greatness: Enemies ducked behind cover, peeked out, and occasionally fired blindly around a corner...only to be shuffled onto the short bus for bipolar team tactics. Foes failed to coordinate attacks, even when standing near each other—or they set up preposterous ambushes, knowing exactly when we'd turn a corner into a hail of gunfire. It's not quite *Three Stooges* moronic, but it's not fit for tactical Mensa membership either.

The only other possible obstacle could be in the storytelling. Developer Metropolis is based in Poland, and Eastern Euro titles tend to have more broken English than a *Scrabble* game at Borat's pad. We're keeping our fingers crossed for no lost-in-translation moments after hearing a few early sampled bits. Unless, of course, the developers want to intentionally amp up the audio cheese—in which case, we say, "You're off to a great start!"

You know what? Take any critiques with a grain of salt. We're playing with an 80-percent-complete build; as we go to press, there's still time for the developers to tweak the game. But if they hope to hit their intended holiday release schedule, the clock is ticking. ● **Darren Gladstone**

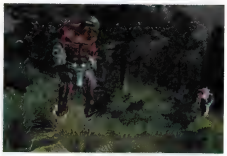
● **Teleportation trick No. 26: Warp behind foes and shoot 'em in the back before the power meter depletes.**

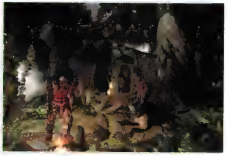
● **Tiger Punching Muay Thai monks? Ayup. Asbestos Jackets? Ditto.**

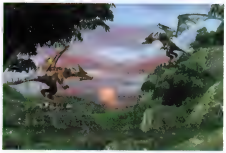


● **Soul sucking—seen it before? *Infernal*'s indebted to *Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy*.**

"Online, every player creates and customizes his or her own character," says Hassinger. "*Sea Two Worlds*' eight-man multiplayer mode as a small-scale MMORPG. Matchmaking servers save characters, inventory, stats, and replays."







• According to TopWare chairman Dirk Hassinger, "If you choose to free an orc from prison, your reputation in the human community suffers and your popularity among orcs improves. Such outcomes can carry consequences across the entire game."

TWO WORLDS

Polish team takes on *Gothic 3* and *Oblivion*

PUBLISHER **TopWare Interactive** DEVELOPER **Reality Pump** GENRE **Action-RPG** RELEASE DATE **March 2007**

PREVIEW

Note the wind-ruffled woods and busy NPCs and know where, between *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *Gothic 3*, to tack *Two Worlds*' pin on the role-playing-game-genre map—Krakow, Poland-based developer Reality Pump charted both RPGs.

Although an admirer of each, and as little as he likes to poke fingers at first-rate programming, TopWare chairman Dirk Hassinger argues that *Oblivion* and *Gothic 3* alike "feel unfinished. The former's world shouldn't seem so empty and sterile. NPCs should lead full lives, not simply stand in place repeating a single action for hours on end," he says. "And if you ride a horse, you should be able to fight from that horse as well. *Gothic 3* offers better atmosphere and a more believable world [than *Oblivion*], especially in NPC behavior, but in other ways strikes me as a technical step backward. And neither has an online multiplayer component."

So far, evidence that *Two Worlds* squashes some of these shortcomings is scant; no more than Hassinger's insistence that his marionettes—working, sleeping, scheming, whatever—live free from see-through string-pulling. (Our probing for examples is lost either across languages or in the man's stretched schedule.) Similarly, we'll have to take his word for it that the choices we make influence multiple outcomes.

On paper, *Two Worlds* complicates black-and-white/good-and-bad binaries by splitting its inhabitants' battle lines across a colorful spectrum of interests, and forcing players to pick their own quarrels among the RPG's requisite factions. The Rayburd clan, for example, rules Tharbakin along with its hard-living inhabitants. As the region's former tenants, however, the Karga want back what was once theirs. "You walk into the middle of their war," Hassinger says. "Both sides will pay you well for your skills; but, one way or another, you must make a decision that will cripple and/or destroy one or both clans."

Due to a complex reputation system that calculates a character's standing with all groups, guilds, and races in the game world, every major decision a player makes allegedly affects how he's treated and what options are available to him. "*Two Worlds* offers alternate endings," Hassinger assures, "but we aren't incorporating these just because it's the popular thing to do. These are intrinsic to the game itself." Of course, while diplomacy decides who you war with and when, war itself is unavoidable.

Two Worlds does away with computational die rolling, and Hassinger describes the swordplay and sorcery on tap as a "next-gen take on the system introduced in *Oblivion*. Fighting is physics-based, but because we permit more moves and animations, our combat is more interesting and challenging. Actually, I'd compare melee action to the *Tekken* series (PS2), fighting on horseback to *Shadow of the Colossus* (PS2), and spellcasting to action-RPGs in general."

Also, as with RPGs in general, players opt into warrior, ranger, or wizard roles according to preference for heavy armor and two-handed weapons, darts and arrows, or destructive spells...but you sorted that out somewhere between *Oblivion* and *Gothic*.

• **Shawn Elliott**

EUROPE RISING?

Is it becoming financially feasible to develop PC games primarily for the European market? Surprisingly, TopWare chairman Dirk Hassinger says no. "In all of Europe, only Germany has a market with definite tastes that differ from the continent, and which is big enough to make focused development feasible. Anno 1701, *Gothic 3*, and *The Settlers IV: The Next Generation* are games designed specifically for the German market—they call them, but they have a harder time reaching an international audience. However, this means that nearly all development costs need to be recouped in Germany. Currently, the German PC market is big enough to do this, but I suspect that it will shift to something more in line with North America in the near future."

So what, if anything, characterizes Polish- and/or Eastern European–developed games? "The only thing that I can think of is the technical advantage," Hassinger answers. "East European developers mostly use proprietary game engines and no middleware."

GLADSTONED

Injury on the field!

COLUMN

My middle finger won't move. It's stuck. Totally immobilized. I'm not kidding. I could use a little help here.

Y'know, at times like this—even when I'm being sincere (it happens on occasion)—it's hard to get any sympathy. No tears lost over some jerk whose chief responsibilities include playing videogames for a living and figuring out new ways to sneak the phrase "brown applesauce" into a national publication.

Here I am, benched—unable to play games, wearing some freaky voodoo glove to ward off carpal tunnel, and hunting and pecking my way through this story. And please, no jokes about my love life. What brought this on? I have a name for my pain, and it is "WASD." That's right: I'm now a tendonitis casualty from playing too many PC games. One minute, I'm minding my own business—and then, all of a sudden, some renegade digit on my left hand forgets who's boss. The clawed formation my left hand assumes when playing first-person shooters has put me in a world of hurt. I know I live a pretty damned charmed life, playing games and all—and if this is the worst that can happen to me, I'm friggin' ecstatic. In the meantime, the doctor's orders: I can't play any WASD-centric games until my hand gets better. Talk about bittersweet irony!

So no *Battlefield 2142*? No *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*? Hmm. Wait a sec. Maybe this isn't as bad as it could be. This whole tendonitis thing could be my body's way of saying, "Hey, maybe now's a good time to take a break. Go outside, maybe check out that new brick at the multiplex. Or, you know what? Your fiancée is sitting right near you. Try talking to her. She might actually like it."

Now that I think about it, I can use the break. Athletes get some downtime in the off-season, so why can't I? (Yes, I just compared myself to an athlete. You got a problem with that?) When something goes haywire, they run to the doctor and start some Herculean physical-therapy routine until they're ready to return to action.

But this does actually get me wondering: Do professional gamers worry about this, too? Does Fatal1ty ice down his mitts after a training session? Does he perform regular hand-calisthenics routines? Does he have a personal hand trainer? Man, that'd be sweet. Wish I had one of those right about now.

Barring that, I just gotta take it easy—maybe switch over to a gamepad for a bit (the horror!). I just hope that I'm properly healed in time for *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*.

> I'M NOW A TENDONITIS CASUALTY FROM PLAYING TOO MANY PC GAMES.

HANDY TIPS

At the risk of getting even remotely serious, I'm gonna save you a trip to the doctor. Here are some things to keep in mind when gaming.

Stop. If you're playing anything for more than an hour, take a breather. Miss a round of fighting or just find a safe spot in game and walk away. Go see that "real" thing you've been hearing so much about.

Hands up. Extending fingers and placing palms together, put your elbows out and gently press your hands together. To achieve the proper form, envision something between "Shaolin monk" and "screaming meemie fan."

Hands out. First, extend your left arm and hold your left hand parallel to the floor, palm down. Take your right hand and place it across your left one. With the four fingers from your right hand on the back of your left hand, and the right thumb pressed against your left palm's base, gently push the left hand downward. Now, switch hands.

All right, back to World of WarCraft. Send me $25 for the copy, take two aspirin, and call me in the morning.

Darren Gladstone

Senior editor Darren Gladstone just unceremonially flipped off a couple hundred thousand readers. Flip back at darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY: JANUARY 2007

High noon in PC gaming's Wild West

THE GOOD

MICROSOFT CHANGES VISTA LICENSING TERMS

Rejoice! Microsoft recently went back on its PC-community-infuriating decision to only allow a single postactivation reinstall of the upcoming Windows Vista operating system. Under the new licensing terms, Vista works more like the current Windows XP: You can reinstall it as many times as you need to, but it can only remain active on a single PC at a time. Yay!

THE BAD

VIRUSES FOR EVERYONE!

According to security vendor Symantec, ever-increasing amounts of exploit code—meaning viruses, spyware, adware, and denial-of-service attacks—are expected to plague Apple's Mac OS X as it continues to gain in popularity. Much like celebrities and their paparazzi, this negative attention is the steep price that such vital software pays for fortune and glory.

THE UGLY

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

They're getting out of hand again. Practically every new game coming out these days is screaming the message: "Get a new PC, loser." But not all of us want or can afford a new one yet. Developers: Calm down. Yes, we love new and shiny, we love bells and whistles, but we also love to play our games. So ease up on designing for PCs none of us have yet. Not everything has to be on the bleeding edge.

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Let's GAME

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XTRAS

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1UP NETWORK

OVERHEARD IN OUTLAND

WOW* geezers on life after 60 in *The Burning Crusade

PREVIEW

SEREVIAN: Forget Blood Elves, Draenei, what bit of obscure lore gets fouled up by putting Paladins in the Horde...

PHLENSE: ...or the Draenei crash-landing their *spaceship* in Azeroth...

SEREVIAN: ...The main thing I've taken from playing the *Burning Crusade* beta is that it is the Great Equalizer. Everyone gets to basically start over.

PHLENSE: Yeah...I've already forgotten the new races; there's no way I'm grinding to 60 again, but your Great Equalizer is kinda pissing me off. I went through the three-boss Hellfire Ramparts five-man instance in an hour and got some blue boots that are better than my tier 2 Bloodfang Boots. Once *BC* hits, there won't be much difference between my character, who's been at level 60 for over a year, and a rogue that just hit 60 two weeks ago, and that's just weird.

SEREVIAN: But this is just how MMOs and expansions go—you get the best gear, then a new dungeon opens up (or, in this case, an alternate universe) with better gear. There's no light at the end of the tunnel—there's just the tunnel, and the tunnel, and the tunnel. From what I've played, *BC*'s "gear replacement curve" is proving fairly evenly paced—it'll be several levels before I have my hat, bracers, cape, or even half of my entire armor set replaced—but yeah, by level 70, all bets are off.

PHLENSE: "Mudflation" is inevitable, and I still think it may be severe enough in this case to make people reconsider how and why they play the game. For me, it already has; my guild's final Blackwing Lair run was last week—partly because of my new-blue-boot story—and now we're concentrating on Ahn'Qiraj.

I spend the rest of my in-game hours trying to figure out which alt to level (my 30 hunter or 34 warrior), which class is going to be over-powered god mode in *BC*, and how much I'll hate myself if I'm playing a female Night Elf hunter named Gams.

I think my guild will transition to the new 25-man endgame dungeons with only a little drama—but what's going to happen with the überguilds that have evolved to conquer the cutting edge of 40-man content? I know that if my guild broke up I'd seriously consider quitting the game.

SEREVIAN: My guild drama has already begun—mine's a 500-plus-member monster with a layered caste system. There's an elite 40-man raiding crew within the metaguild; a minor league crew (that's me) that runs mostly 20-man raids but can't hold a steady roster; an underground shadow guild of subversive complainers who *want* to be on the elite squad and keep threatening to form their own guild; a bunch of normal people who just like to play; and then some filthy untouchables who exclaim "Ding!" when they hit level 9 and ask, "Does anyone else here cut themselves?" in guild chat.

PHLENSE: Dude. Server transfer. I'll put in a good word.

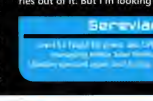
SEREVIAN: Nah, I get too many good stories out of it. But I'm looking at *BC*'s clean-slate policy as my chance to reincarnate into a higher caste. I shall take clear advantage of others' misfortunes.

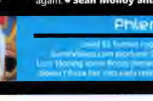
PHLENSE: Karma will get you in the end—speaking of payback, I fear for PVP. Past experience has shown that Blizzard ain't the best at class balancing, and I think the new talents and tweaks are going to create some serious mismatches—especially in the 2-vs.-2 arenas. Blizzard reps have said before the game is balanced around 5-vs.-5 PVP, but look at rogues—great 1-vs.-1, dead within seconds in 5-vs.-5. How long is it going to take Blizzard to rebalance the whole game after *BC* hits retail? A year?

SEREVIAN: Can you imagine what would have happened if Blizzard had tried to implement hero classes in *BC*? Or even one *regular* new class? That's the only thing keeping me from harshing too much on the fact that the beta feels so much like business as usual—refinement, yeah, but lacking anything that'll radically change the game. How sad is it that I'm excited about a *looking for group* interface?

PHLENSE: Hell, I'll be happy if my rogue can just take out a shadow priest/frost mage/hunter/warlock 50 percent of the time. And if not, say hello to Gams, boys. Her tree-trunk thighs may mesmerize, but her multishot will crit for, like, 4K.

SEREVIAN: AFK, guildie is cutting himself again. ● **Sean Molloy and Demian Linn**





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RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 KEEPIN' IT UNREAL

Want to see what all the fuss is about with Epic's new graphics engine? The first place you get to see it in action is the Xbox 360's *Gears of War*. Now that we've finally got that game out the door, maybe we'll be playing *UT 2007* soon.

2 OFF THE HOOK

Yeah, you want to show off your latest sweet-ass cell phone to people. Now, it's time to go seriously old school on 'em with a slightly modern take. Thinkgeek.com's $40 retro phone isn't a prop; it's a wireless Bluetooth handset!

3 COVER STORY

If you've never heard of Me First and the Gimme Gimmes, the band's shtick is pretty formulaic punk covers of popular nonpunk songs. Their latest release, *Love Their Country*, features Willie Nelson songs and the theme from *Smokey and the Bandit*. Goofy, maybe—but catchy as hell.

4 INTELLIVISION 2

While everyone else is lining up to find PS3s or Wiis, you can distract your little bro with Mattel's Hyperscan (hyperscangamer.com). This simple $70 console uses CD-based games and playing cards with RFID chips that upload abilities into the games. Think *Magic: The Gathering* meets *Mortal Kombat*.

5 PRESIDENTIAL OVERSIGHT

Before Dubya's victory in the 2000 elections, *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone produced thirty would-be presidential skits based on whatever was the short hype du—That's My Bush!, which mercilessly lampooned politics and sitcoms—is now available on DVD.

6 SHOOT!

Don't move. You lie in wait, one shot—one kill. Campers, your weapon has arrived. The $30 Nerf N-Strike Longshot CS-6 comes with 12 darts capable of hitting targets up to 35 feet away. This spongy sniper rifle can be easily broken down for his while on assignment (translation: some assembly required).

7 THE SOFTWIRE

This inventive sci-fi book by R.L. Haurena is a lot more than a cybernetic-heavy thriller, though it may sound similar at first. It's software child develops uncanny powers—in this case, interfacing with computers. Be sure to check out reignofortals.com, a free MMO game based on the series.

8 ROTISSERIE CONGRESS

Representative Bob Goodlatte (R-VA-6th District) is a good bet. He snagged 120 points when H.R.3408 became a law. Just avoid Representative Roy Blunt (R-MO). His latest bill, H.R.6130, got kicked to subcommittee and earned a measly five points. The creators of Web game http://fantasycongress.us are betting that you'll be more into politics if you treat it like fantasy football. It's free, it's fun, it's democracy: the game!

9 FARE PLAY

Some stuff is too weird to be made up—and cabbies are the keepers of some of the best stories of all time. Snag a copy of M.C. Mars' *Don't Take Me the Long Way*, in which he recounts events from his 20 years of driving taxis in San Francisco.

10 THE PAYBACK

Those capes-and-tights guys may save the world, but when it comes to collateral damage, they get a pass. Not anymore. In the new comic, *The Boys*, writer Garth Ennis assembles a twisted team of psychopaths to make 'em pay. WARNING: NOT FOR KIDS!

PIPELINE

Save some cash for these upcoming games

DECEMBER 2006	PUBLISHER
Rainbow Six: Vegas	Ubisoft
The Shield	Aspyr Media
JANUARY 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Battlestations: Midway	Eidos Interactive
Heart of Empire: Rome	Paradox Interactive
Jade Empire	2K Games
World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade	Blizzard
FEBRUARY 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Dead Reefs	DreamCatcher
Fuel	DreamCatcher
Genesis Rising: The Universal Crusade	DreamCatcher
Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	SOE
L.A. Street Racing	Groove Games
Maelstrom	Codemasters
PureSim Baseball 2006	Matrix Games
Storm of War: Battle of Britain	Ubisoft
Test Drive Unlimited	Atari
War Front: Turning Point	CDV Software
MARCH 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	Electronic Arts
Dungeons & Dragons Online: Forsaken Lands	Atari
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Midway
Marine Sharpshooter III	Groove Games
Resident Evil 4	Ubisoft
TimeShift	Vivendi Games
WINTER/SPRING 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	Funcom
Alone in the Dark	Atari
BioShock	2K Games
Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway	Ubisoft
Call of Juarez	Ubisoft
Crysis	Electronic Arts
Earache Extreme Metal Racing	Metro3D
Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar	Stardock
Haze	Ubisoft
Hellgate: London	Namco Bandai
Huxley	Webzen
Project Offset	Offset Software
Spore	Electronic Arts
Supreme Commander	THQ
Surrender? "Nuts!"	Kudosoft
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft
Shadowrun	Microsoft
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	SOE

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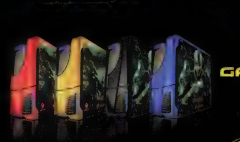

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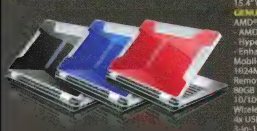

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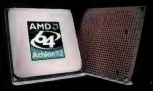

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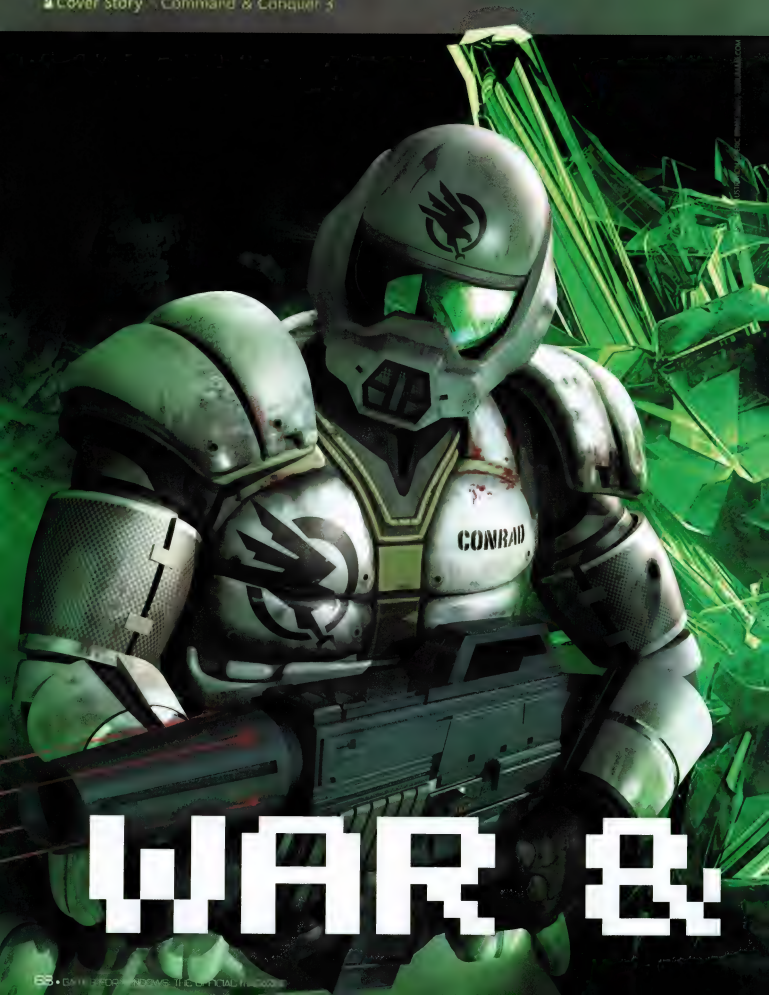


WAR &

THE NEW FACTION

***Tiberium Wars*' third faction is revealed: Tiberium-hungry biomechanical aliens. The Global Defense Initiative treats them as foes. The Brotherhood of Nod welcomes them as visitors. The truth's probably somewhere in between.**

EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON

Kane. Tank rushes. Resource hoarding. Full-motion video with B-list sci-fi celebs. Yup, the legendary *Command & Conquer* RTS series is back, and nostalgic fanboys couldn't be happier. The emergence of *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars* last May, however, left more questions than answers. Who's the mysterious third faction? How does the game play? And can the *C&C* legacy hold its own in a post-*Company of Heroes* world?

We're here to answer those questions. We've seen the third faction and confronted the enemy in the single-player game. We've challenged EA's finest to a winner-takes-all multiplayer match and lived—so now we'll tell about it.

BY BRIAN BOECKER

PIECES

The definitive scoop on *Command & Conquer*'s return

• The only problem with alien urban renewal—a Starbucks on every corner.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF *COMMAND & CONQUER*

COMMAND & CONQUER

GDI and the Brotherhood of Nod struggle to gain control of an extraterrestrial but incalculably valuable substance called Tiberium. This first game had two mutually exclusive campaigns, so you could work toward your preferred conclusion: Either GDI vaporizes Nod's headquarters with an orbital ion cannon, or Nod nukes Paris. Tough choice, we know.

COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIAN SUN

It's revealed in this sequel that GDI "won" the first C&C, but that it's now fighting to preserve what few "clean" (i.e., non-Tiberium-infested) areas of Earth remain. Meanwhile, the down-but-not-out Brotherhood of Nod fights among itself until its former leader, Kane, reveals that it takes more than some wimpy ion cannon to keep a bald man down.

Please take careful note of the highly organic feel of the alien base structures. Now repeat after us: "This looks nothing like a Zerg outpost. We swear."

Command and Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars proves that no matter what galaxy you're from, you still need to create harvester units to collect supplies.

The GDI forces on the south side of the river need to rally and take down one of the alien superunits, the Annihilator Tripod, ASAP if they have any hope of crossing.

COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIAN SUN—FIRESTORM

An expansion to Tiberian Sun, *Firestorm* sees GDI and Nod team up against CABAL, a renegade Nod A.I. CABAL's goal is to assimilate all humans into its collective consciousness by transforming them into cyborgs. GDI and Nod take out the threat, of course, but the last scene reveals that CABAL isn't CA-put.

COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

GDI has managed to create pockets of normal terra among the Tiberium—unfortunately, most people still live in partially infested areas, and they're pissed. Many rally under the banner of the resurgent Brotherhood of Nod and now prepare an assault on the baby-baby GDI. Meanwhile, some not-so-friendly visitors from another star system want to put the hurt on everyone in their path.

SATELLITE UPLINK

First, let's get you up to speed. Forget the greenhouse effect or holes in the ozone—the crystalline green compound Tiberium is slowly poisoning the planet, spreading across the landscape and threatening to wipe out life as we know it. Its value as a resource has sparked a worldwide war. The Global Defense Initiative (GDI) has finally developed a means to combat the alien mineral's spread; while cleanup commences in Europe and the States, the evil Kane and his Brotherhood of Nod are back to their old terrorist tricks.

Suddenly, the war takes an unexpected turn. A mysterious force hits Germany: Munich goes dark, and formerly spotless Cologne is suddenly sprouting fields of Tiberium. Nod isn't behind it. It's aliens—part biological, part mechanical, and 100 percent dependent upon Tiberium to survive. Flying swarms of intelligent razor blades slice GDI's scouts to ribbons. Massive, shambling tripods with laser-bearing tentacles punch through the toughest tank armor. City-dwarfing motherships belch out plasmatic destruction. There goes the neighborhood.

While the GDI calls them "invaders," the Brotherhood of Nod hails them as "visitors." At some point during *C&C3*'s 30-mission single-player campaign, all becomes clear. You start by choosing either the GDI or Brotherhood of Nod—but by the game's end, you'll be crushing humans under foot, tentacle, and/or pseudopod.

In order to tell this apocalyptic tale, EA assembled a team of screenwriters, producers, directors, and even MIT eggheads to hash out the campaign's story line. Executive producer Mike Verdu promises the plot follows right in the footsteps of previous *C&C* Tiberian titles—he even talks about incorporating limited branching elements during the single-player experience.

Your first mission in the GDI campaign in Germany, for example, is a recon sweep through Munich. After its successful completion, you may choose between confronting the alien menace in either Cologne or Frankfurt. Choose Cologne, and you'll liberate an airfield that will provide air support for you in the Frankfurt scenario. Opt for Frankfurt, and you'll get extra tanks in Cologne. Ultimately, though, Verdu insists that "no matter what order you do the missions, the story will unfold coherently and end in a satisfying way."

LOW POWER

Even though the calendar in EA's Los Angeles office says 2006, the first thing you see in the single-player campaign is full-motion video—a nod to 1996 and the Velveeta-dripping salad days of FMV. *Tiberium Wars*' cast includes fanboy fave Joe Kucan returning as Kane (see "Raising Kane," pg. 73). Watching his back is a veritable who's-who of sci-fi stars, including Josh Holloway (Sawyer from *Lost*), Tricia Helfer (Number Six from the new *Battlestar Galactica*), and Lando "Billy Dee Williams" Calrissian, just to name a few. The cut-scenes hit that sweet-spot level of camp: just east of Pacino, a bit west of Shatner.

The "cinematic" vibe extends beyond cut-scenes. Deserts, bleached out and bleak, give way to Tiberium-heavy "red zones" with vibrant

C&C COMMUNIQUÉ

While the music is not being written by C&C vet Frank Klepacki, newcomers Steve Jablonsky and Trevor Morris are composing pieces in the classic C&C style, complete with some shout-outs to popular old tracks.

primary colors. (The visuals are gorgeous, but Verdu assures us the demo is running on a single graphics card, with no dual-graphics-card SLI mumbo jumbo.) For units themselves, detailed animations bring each trooper to life, and it's very easy to pick out even small units from the map at a glance. Considering Nod leans heavily on stealth tactics, scrutinizing every pixel is essential or you might not notice that tank uncloaking inside your base.

All this environmental detail exists for more than just your pixel-hunting pleasure. Slick, reflective office buildings can garrison infantry à la *Company of Heroes*. Indeed, even if you don't order your forces to garrison *in* a structure, troops near any kind of cover—buildings, cars, rubble—will automatically use it as defilade. The catch: Nearly everything on a *C&C3* map is destructible. That means if you keep units in a location too long, the enemy will be sure to redecorate the sky with a stunning combination of drywall and troopers.

HARVESTER UNDER ATTACK

C&C3 will no doubt draw some flak for sticking to the old-school "dirt-farming" model of RTS gameplay. The best modern games of the genre, including Relic's *Company of Heroes* and *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*, sport tactical, capture-and-hold resource-gathering models with less emphasis on ordering around servants, peons, peasants, or—in this case—big, bulky harvesters. *C&C3*, by contrast, still has you scooping up crystals and building power plants—just like in the "good ol' days."

Systems like *C&C3*'s are easy to pick up, but hard to master—hell, Ensemble Studios has predicated an entire series on resource gathering. In addition, dirt farming lends itself well to *C&C3*'s simplified

RAISING KANE

Not everyone gets to come back from the dead three times. Decked out in his familiar sinister leathery garb and with his dome freshly polished, Joseph D. Kucan (aka the guy who plays Kane) hasn't aged a day in 10 years. That only lends more credence to Kane's "immortality" as the maniacal mastermind behind the Brotherhood of Nod. How does it feel to rule an international terrorist cult and reprise his role after all this time?

On Kane's new look:
"I've gained 200 pounds, so obviously Kane's going to be a little heavier. And there's the long, curly hair cascading boyishly down my shoulders. No, just kidding."

How Kane survived that ion cannon blast:
"One of my favorite things about the fiction of [*C&C*] is unanswered questions. I think it's very important, when you're dealing with an audience of one...to leave some space for imagination. I know why Kane comes back—as an actor I have to answer those questions for the character to work—but I ain't tellin'."

On what makes Kane such a good dictator:
"I think what separates evil dictators from [the rest of] us is the willingness to use people, to view them as cattle. Kane preaches an ideology of 'brotherhood,' but he's also [a user]."

On his favorite unit:
"If I say Mammoth Tanks, I'll be drawn and quartered, right? However, I will say I used to be the Stealth Tank king. That was my favorite unit ever. And Banshees are pretty cool."

On what's next for him:
"The *Command & Conquer 3* expansion pack!"

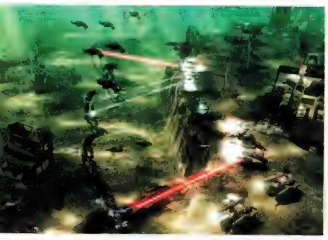
controls. For better or for worse, you don't customize individual units for particular combat functions or micromanage special abilities in the heat of a fight. You won't clash over map control points, or get into constant firefights in key areas. Moreover, you're not going to know ahead of time where the majority of battles will go down, so there's almost no camping or bushwhacking in a game of *C&C3*. Of course, if you're into tactical gameplay (or if you have 1337 micro skills), that may not sound particularly appealing—this game is built for players more into action than minutiae. It's also another gameplay decision clearly geared toward making *C&C3* "console friendly." The serendipitous coincidence also makes the game "more accessible" on PC.

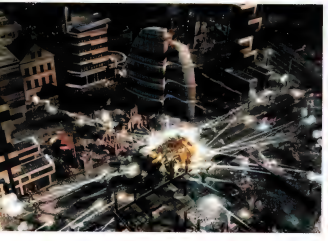
As with the classic resource-gathering setup, the units doing the gathering don't double as soldiers—so that means you need to keep a vigilant watch on your infrastructure units. Verdu notes, "Some players' entire strategies revolve around attacking harvesters." Some call it "cheese," some say it's fair game, and others might kick the crap out of you at school the next day for doing it—but for better or for worse, it's back.

To help reduce some of the frustration players might experience, harvesters are now equipped with some basic defenses. Of course, combat-ready harvesters may prove to be counterproductive—rather than run for cover when they're attacked, your gatherers now stubbornly stand their ground and fight back, even against overwhelming odds. Worse, there's no button to recall them to a safe haven. On the other hand, if your little buddies do end up getting bullied, you'll at least get a cheerful "a harvester is under attack" warning from the console so you can send in the armored cavalry. And, to be fair, harvesters are stubborn, but they aren't totally dim: They'll automatically seek out replacement Tiberium supplies once their original cache depletes, even if it means traveling across the map to find more. Moreover, should you have more than one harvester, the A.I. is smart enough to send one on a long-distance Tiberium run while keeping the other near the depleted supply, harvesting the stuff as it slowly replenishes.

The goal, as with most modern RTS games, is to allow you to make strategic decisions without having to micromanage every single unit on the battlefield. (*C&C3*'s upcoming competitor *Supreme Commander* takes a similar approach, allowing you to queue up orders—all the way out to the endgame if you're thinking that far ahead.)

Strategy and planning are all well and good, but nothing beats authentic combat experience. *Tiberium Wars* moves at a fast, frenetic pace—and maps are small in relation to how quickly your units move. As Prussian general Helmuth von Moltke noted: "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy." With that, it was time to face my foe.





PLAYER: Avatar WarMech
POSITION: Quarterback
TEAM: NOD
YEAR: Senior
Only available to players who've mastered the Eight Virtues, these modular mechs are not only tough and powerful, but they're also able to integrate weaponry taken from other units into their own systems. To paraphrase Charles Darwin: It is not the strongest of the species but the most adaptable that kicks ass.
1/1
1/1
0/1

This is our take on what the telestrator could look like when *C&C3* ships.

"WE WANT TO MAKE THIS AS MUCH FUN TO WATCH AS IT IS TO PLAY."

–MIKE VERDU
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, EALA

ENEMY UNITS SPOTTED

My opponent, *C&C3* producer Amer Ajami, walks into the room. We nod, two cagey opponents eyeing each other before the battle of wills begins. There's a catchphrase at EA that you can expect to hear more of: "RTS as a sport." Verdu says, "We want to make *C&C3* as much fun to watch as it is to play." Most of you are probably going, "Shyeah, right." Whatever the case, EA has inserted all sorts of bells and whistles into *C&C3*'s multiplayer game, hoping it'll become the next major competition vehicle in the world of electronic "sports." While matches only allow eight actual players, they'll accommodate far more folks as spectators. Among these spectators, one guy can be designated the "administrator"; he'll be able to move the camera for everyone else, offer commentary on what's happening via voice-over-IP, and even use a built-in John Madden–style "telestrator" to break down plays. Good thing, too—I'll want to replay those reels countless times after I beat this man at his own game. You can mark my words on that.

29550
1
2
3
PLAYER: Juggernaut
POSITION: Offensive Line
TEAM: GDI
YEAR: Freshman
This walking artillery platform is capable of carrying out both direct attacks on buildings and units and providing indirect artillery support. Simply use your Sniper Team to call in a little bad news on your enemies' heads. A single Juggernaut can take down a reinforced structure in a matter of seconds.
Zone Trooper
Rank:

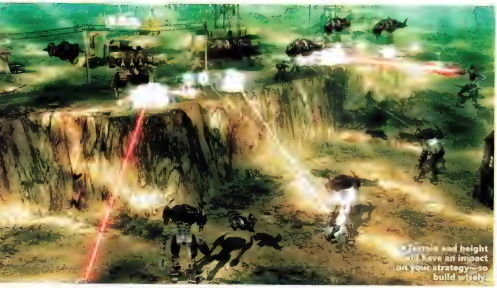
C&C COMMUNIQUÉ

The Forgotten (those creepy mutants from previous *C&C* games) are best left forgotten. They won't be a playable race, nor will they factor into *Tiberium Wars*' story line.

Game 1:
Amer promises to go easy on me as Mr. Goody Two-Shoes chooses GDI. "I didn't get into the game biz by being coddled," I reply while siding with Nod. A Nod harvester bug nixes the first round. Amer quits out, and the "Mission Successful" screen declares me the winner. One for one!

Game 2: This time, it's civil war: GDI versus GDI. "Our design philosophy was to make *C&C3* as fast as possible," Verdu says, "right down to loading times." And *C&C3* proceeds at a breakneck pace. From the speedy mission load times (less than 10 seconds) to the relentless tempo of the build-gather-tech-build cycle, there isn't a single moment to sit back and relax.

This is a real-time strategy experience for quick draws and steely nerves. One benefit (or drawback) of the game's swift pace is that it's tough to rush. I should know—I tried. By the time you get your units ready to overrun enemy territory, he'll be three levels up the tech chain and more than capable of taking you on with only a few of his advanced units ready.



Terrain and height will have an impact on your strategy—so build wisely.

Orca attacks light up the NOD's factories like the Fourth of July. How patriotic!

PLAYER: **Annihilator Tripod**
POSITION: **Offensive Line**
TEAM: **Alien**
YEAR: **Sophomore**
With a shambling gait and three independently targetable beam weapons mounted on tentacles, this *War of the Worlds* refugee is pretty fearsome. Drop one in the middle of an enemy battle group, and the Annihilator will turn it into an enemy Girl Scout troop.

PLAYER: **Razor Drones and Cutters**
POSITION: **Running Backs**
TEAM: **Alien**
YEAR: **Freshman**
Cutters are the basic infantry unit of the aliens; these bladed "clouds" rip through the air like schools of flying piranha, shredding enemy infantry. Pair with Razor Drones (tiny, hovering robots that dice up vehicles) for a truly formidable early-game force.

> OUR MATCH'S TUG-OF-WAR STYLE WAS NOT ONLY TYPICAL, BUT INTENTIONAL.

C&C COMMUNIQUÉ
The right sidebar GUI is back, and it's modified to be as console-friendly as possible. (The game will be on the Xbox 360, too, after all).

Now for the play-by-play: First thing up—build a power plant, then a refinery. By design, you can't queue up multiple building orders with a single base. In order to do this, you need to build separate structures called "cranes." Each crane occupies a tab on your interface and can build simultaneously with your main base. I find that it's kind of a pain to have to switch from tab to tab when other things are going on, so it's vital to get important structures out early to prevent them from languishing while you're otherwise occupied. After the infrastructure is up and running, it's time for a war factory, barracks, and a tech center.

The industrial revolution is on! I'm now producing second-tier troops, and buildings are going up so quickly and resource collection is going so well that I switch plans and go for high-level tech. Checking the clock, I realize that I went from having a single base to building the top-tier units in the game in less than eight minutes.

XTRAS
Want more Command & Conquer 3? Then you don't have to SPEND $$$ ever. Two more info, video features, and even a chance to work at EA for a day!
1UP NETWORK

While I take 15 or so seconds (an ungodly long wait in *C&C3* time) to ponder whether Mammoth Tanks or Zone Troopers are the way to go, Amer rolls up with a passel of shock troops. Fortunately, my base defenses hold. Still, he demolishes an airfield and some very expensive Orcas. Note that the defensive structures in *C&C3* are fierce (perhaps even a wee bit overpowered in this build) and well worth their relatively low cost. Turtling is most definitely a solid option in this game, especially for new players—as long as you cover all the angles. Defense turrets have limited fire arcs.

Next, I decide to take a page from the German war machine and try a Luftwaffe-style air blitz. With three airfields erected, I need to start constructing Orcas—and quick. Amer somehow has another force on its way to attack already, this time with at least six Mammoth Tanks. It's all but over for me, right? Wrong! My Orcas tear through the tanks like a razor-blade tornado. Honestly, it's a bit disappointing how easily the Mammoth Tanks go down, but who's complaining? With the assault repelled, this could be the perfect opportunity to press the attack. I hum Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries* while ordering the airstrike. The Orcas rain fire upon a few of Amer's factories, but he was ready for this. Antiaircraft turrets and missile troops turn them into shrapnel. He didn't plan this, did he? Did he lure me into a trap?

At this point, Amer, who had expanded his base into another Tiberium field, quickly rebuilds, and I'm quickly overwhelmed...and...well...this fight is over. What should I have expected? He *is* the game's producer, after all.

The ease with which cheap missile troops took down my expensive air units is a harsh reality, but it demonstrates the rigid rock-paper-scissors dynamic built into *C&C3*'s combat. This tête-à-tête with Amer also underscores the inherent back-and-forth gameplay of a *C&C3* multiplayer match. He explains that our match's tug-of-war style was not only typical, but intentional. *C&C3* makes it tough for one side to get the upper hand straight out of the box, even if that side is more experienced. You've got to exploit strategic rather than tactical mistakes to win, and that makes the matches—quick as they may be—more evenly balanced.

Easy for him to say. I'm still wiping sweat from my brow after that loss. Maybe I'll review the reels and use the telestrator to highlight where things went wrong. Next time, Amer won't know what hit him. ■ **Eric Neigher**

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INSIDE

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Does it do justice to the *D&D* name?

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If you hate playing with other people, this MMO's for you.

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In the future, all robots look generic.

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THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

"Wait for the patch," they say. What about the guy who bought your game on day one, developer? Why should *he* have to wait for the freakin' patch to properly play the game he just plunked down a hard-earned $49.99 for? Here's some advice for the publishers of three of this season's most eagerly awaited games—*Neverwinter Nights 2*, *Battlefield 2142*, and *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*—all of which suffer from severe technical FUBARs: Make sure your game works right before you ship it, geniuses.

In the case of *Dark Messiah*, things get even more complicated. While a large percentage of players couldn't even load the game, many others experienced zero tech issues. You'll note that our reviewer was among the blessed latter group...though those of us at the *GFW* offices who tried to play this game had no such luck (and even now, as we go to print some three weeks after *Dark Messiah* shipped, we *still* don't have the thing operational). Bear this cautionary tale in mind as you make your holiday purchasing decisions...although, after you read what we've got to say about it, you may not need any further warning at all.

● **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award

Any game scoring a [illegible] award, signifying [illegible] PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent
Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

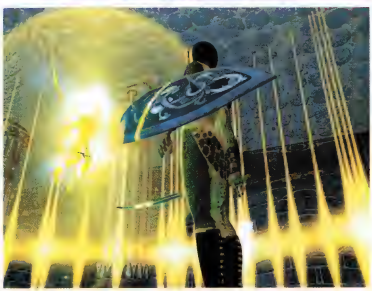
5-6.5: Average
Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible
Never should have been made

HALF MY COMBAT EXPERIENCE WAS MARRED BY FIGHTING THE CAMERA WHEN I SHOULD HAVE BEEN FIGHTING THE ENEMY.

● You need high strength and fortitude to endure *NWN2*'s tech issues.



● Obsidian's single-player campaign trumps the one in the original *NWN*.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2

Your next quest: finish developing the game!

PUBLISHER **Atari** DEVELOPER **Obsidian Entertainment** GENRE **RPG** AVAILABILITY **Retail** ESRB RATING **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 256 MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER **2-64 (up to 3 max co-op in the main campaign)** VERSION REVIEWED **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Neverwinter Nights 2 is about two patches away from being a good game. Obsidian Entertainment crafts a fine single-player campaign in this sequel to BioWare's groundbreaking 2002 *Dungeons & Dragons* RPG, but due to a host of annoying performance issues and bewildering design decisions, you're going to need a lot of patience and good hardware karma before you can fully appreciate it.

The first *NWN* was hailed mostly for its toolset that let gamers create their own *D&D* campaigns. BioWare's own campaign, on the other hand, kind of blew. This time around, BioWare enlisted the aid of Obsidian, longtime collaborators and *D&D* veterans (*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II*, *Icewind Dale II*, and *Planescape: Torment*, among others), and the result—in terms of storytelling, characters, and quests—is a much more engaging single-player experience.

Obsidian's campaign doesn't break new ground (Uh-oh! Something evil is happening in the Forgotten Realms!), but it's done with much humor, intelligence, and love and respect for the wonky fantasy geekfest that is *D&D*. This is an old-fashioned RPG, where brains take precedence over twitch skills, and success is largely determined by the understanding of a rule set that only a genius or a 13-year-old could fully comprehend. Not that the game's inaccessible—in fact, Obsidian did a nice job of demystifying *D&D* for newbies (a friendly 175-page manual helps), while the relatively linear plot and simple side quests keep you moving along and leveling up at a good, strong pace.

Obsidian wisely increased the first game's one-companion limit up to four, giving you a full, controllable party...as it always should be in *D&D*. The NPCs that join you are the usual assortment of fantasy clichés (the dwarf is grumpy!), but again, the strong writing makes it work—even if none of the characters quite rise to Minsc-level greatness. Your actions and decision-making influence your party's loyalty to you and affect elements of the plot, and a healthy injection of moral ambiguity ensures that not all of those decisions are easy to make.

DUMMIES AND LAGGIN'

All of this is great—and if the review ended here, we could all sing "Kumbaya" together in happy harmony. But the sad truth is that *NWN2* shipped in a pretty messy state, and even after a couple of patches (as of this writing), the biggest problems remain. In general, and depending on your system and tolerance, you're going to spend a lot of time up front doing the job the developers should have done before shipping the game: fixing the weak A.I., futzing around with the graphics options and camera controls, and resetting basic gameplay options until the thing is playable. And good luck with all of that, because not all of it is easily done (or even possible).

Obsidian's touting an updated graphics engine, but what exactly is new about it is hard to discern...other than that it runs like crap, even on high-end systems. I played the game on two different gaming PCs, and in both cases had to suffer, at times, through slideshow speed and terrible stuttering even with almost all the graphics options turned off and running in a ludicrous 800x600 resolution—simply unacceptable performance, especially for an RPG that still looks about two years old no matter what supposed "enhancements" were made. Comparing the uninspired and featureless character models and environments here to a game like *Company of Heroes*, it's impossible to see (literally!) what the heck's bogging this game down.

Matters are made worse by the camera, which you can configure four ways...all of which suck, as no matter what you choose, you'll find your view obstructed by walls (which can't be made transparent) and other characters. Half of my combat experience in *NWN2* was marred by fighting the camera when I should have been fighting the enemy.

And actually, when I wasn't fighting the camera, I often fought my own party members' A.I. If they weren't being thrown off by bad pathfinding, then they were blundering ahead and casting inappropriate spells, targeting the wrong enemies, or just generally getting in the way. The solution is there: Turn off the A.I. entirely and micromanage every character. But why doesn't it default to that? Other bizarre design choices abound. Where's the ability to pause combat automatically after every round? Why's it so hard to target yourself or friendly party members? Why are so many of the interface components—for spellcasting, item crafting, merchant selling, among others—so cumbersome and non-intuitive?

The net result of all of this—performance, camera, A.I., interface—severely sours the experience and tests the patience of those who simply want to boot the game and play. Who wants to work this hard to have fun?

WAIT AWHILE

The future success of *NWN2* will depend, in the short term, on Obsidian and Atari patching the game...and then, as with the first game, on the fans to provide modules of their own. In the latter, at least, we have faith. But in its current state, and for those who just want a single-player RPG, this is recommended to *D&D* diehards only, who are probably the only ones with enough goodwill to slog through the problems. Everyone else—wait awhile. A great RPG is in here somewhere; it's just not ready yet. ● **Jeff Green**

VERDICT

- **Campaign is better than the one in *NWN1*; user mods will keep it alive for years.**
- **Horrendous performance; awkward controls; lame A.I.**

6\10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

At the proper camera angles, battles look quite convincing—but zoom too far or too close and the illusion starts to break down.

MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR

The devil's in the details

PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly GENRE: Strategy AVAILABILITY: Now! (retail, £ tbd (www.pixeminpowered.com)) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM SPECIFICATIONS: 1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1.1GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Retail

REVIEW

In *Medieval II*, every siege is a snowflake: Hunker down close, marvel at the intricate details, and take it as proof of God or intelligent design—or at least godly game design. The broken bodies (measured in hundreds) left littering a battlefield, the way a castle wall crumples to cannon fire, the arc of flaming arrows fired by archers and rotting cow carcasses flung from trebuchets—*Total War* more than earns its moniker. Even the rules of engagement are nuanced: Cavalry units work wonders with a charge-retreat-charge pattern, flanking matters, and morale is as powerful a weapon as a catapult.

But taken from afar and in large heaps, sieges and snowflakes tend toward sameness; one can only roll a siege tower up to a wall so many different ways (assuming said tower doesn't get confused on the way—*M2*'s got a few pathfinding issues). This rampart, this town square, these legionnaires with ladders—didn't I just do this battle a minute ago? If you spend your Tuesday nights watching History Channel docs about trebuchets, you're in heaven...but if you're used to the wilder variety of RTS games like *Rise of Legends*, déjà vu sets in sooner rather than later. Field battles (and quick battles or online skirmishes) offer a change of scope and pace, but in the Grand Campaign, they come few and far between.

THE FINE LINE

Luckily, an "autoresolve" button lets you skip to the less-flashy but more-lasting, addictive stuff when battle fatigue sets in: turn-based *Civilization*-style wheelings and dealings across olde-tyme Eurasia. While the town-building and army-raising is pretty standard, *M2* makes smart, interesting use of agents—priests, princesses, and other specialized pawns that operate outside your armies. They're important and fun (especially assassins—nothing's more satisfying than successful regicide), but finding your idle agents is obnoxious...and keeping their "levels" on pace with your foes is no easy feat, either, especially when you're saddled with *M2*'s callous diplomacy system. Get ready for your diplomats to "level down"...a lot.

Replayability is high, as each faction starts in a unique situation that forces you to shift your strategy—and 20-odd factions sharing the same map means 20-factorial things that can go awry. An innocent mistake one turn could have unexpected, game-screwing repercussions hours later. Innocent mistake: Sending my good Christian Crusaders on a 20-turn trek to Antioch at the pope's behest. Unexpected outcome: Former pal Hungary turns on me when the Crusade abruptly ends...and my Crusaders revert to a "normal" army in the middle of their territory. Bizarre mission quirks frustrate: The pope threatens to excommunicate me unless I call a temporary truce with "fellow Christians" in the Holy Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Empire, however, was issued no such edict...and is freely tearing down my walls. *M2* quickly makes you pick a side of that fine line between "punishing details" and "richly nuanced rule system."

But those are just quirks, and *Medieval II* is a lot of bang for the bullion—whether you crave a detailed toy-soldiers-in-1197-AD simulator or a complex, rewarding *Civ*-style strategy game, this *Total War* is a total package. **Sean Molloy**

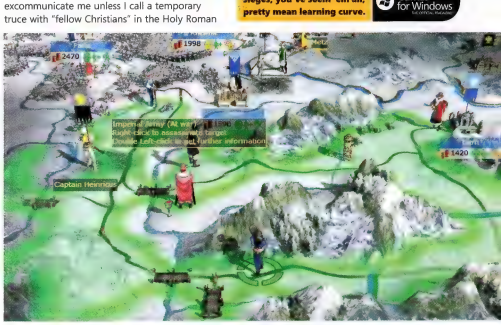
VERDICT

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

- **Exquisitely detailed battles; complex and addictive *Civ*-style main campaign.**
- **Once you've seen a few sieges, you've seem 'em all; pretty mean learning curve.**



Maintaining a good balance of towns and castles is important. Each offers different production alternatives—castles excel at war units, while towns offer a socio-political boon (and better agents).

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STRONGHOLD LEGENDS

All the king's men couldn't put your castle back together again

PUBLISHER 2K Games DEVELOPER Firefly GENRE Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY Retail, E-tail (www.direct2drive.com) ESRB RATING Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 64MB videocard MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players VERSION REVIEWED Retail Box

REVIEW

The problem with fusing a city builder and a real-time strategy game is that one's mainly about building stuff, and the other's mainly about breaking stuff. Sure, there's some breaking in a typical city builder, just as there's some building in a typical RTS. But if you don't make a clear choice, you're asking for trouble.

Sure enough, *Stronghold Legends* is asking for trouble. By combining Firefly's trademark castle building with a full-fledged RTS, this game clumps a lot into your lap. It lumps up easily enough, as do most city builders. But then the fighting starts and everything falls to pieces. Part of the problem is that it's simply not a very good RTS, with terrible pathing, a clumsy interface, sloppy controls, expensive throwaway armies, and a lot of twiddling that you're supposed to do when you should probably mind the apple farming, bread baking, and pole turning.

Economies this brittle don't play well with armies. The walls, boiling oil, and flaming arrows might be briefly pitted against uber-unit dragons, werewolf catapults, and a gaggle of knights with special powers, all looking quaint with this 20-years-ago graphics engine. But eventually, someone's economy breaks and the game is over. *Stronghold Legends* is a game about someone trying to kick over your sand castle, which was never much fun on the beach, and isn't much fun here either. • **Tom Chick**

• Is there a dragonslayer in the house?

VERDICT

+ **Castles are fun to build...**
− **...but not while you're also playing a bad RTS.**

3/10
BAD
Games for Windows

THE GUILD 2

Married—insulted, stabbed, pickpocketed, and kidnapped—with children

PUBLISHER Vivendi DEVELOPER 4Head Studios GENRE Strategy-RPG AVAILABILITY Retail ESRB RATING Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED Retail Box

REVIEW

Weathering insults and scoping far-off villages for buildings worth buying or spots to raise new ones is mostly what you do in *The Guild 2* when you're not baking cakes, settling feuds, having affairs, blowing up rival businesses, or robbing the local muck-a-mucks blind. The idea in this sequel to *Europa 1400: The Guild* is to once more glom the character-creation aspects of an RPG onto the resource-building of an RTS and glaze the resulting whatchamajigger with a coat of medieval dynastic scrumming where he who sleeps around most sticks around longest.

• The lady in blue packs a mean left hook. If you choose to play a rogue (and it's the most fun, trust me) you get to pickpocket, burglarize, extort, and kidnap.

Pulling it off entails consuming busywork as you navigate a sizable three-dimensional medieval landscape populated by hundreds of citizens, juggling both social and economic relations. The good news: You can automate tedious responsibilities, like day-to-day business operations—or hauling raw materials from market to industry and (in crafted form) back again. The bad news: Once you stack the local council with family members, you're incessantly recalled for new elections and criminal proceedings to fend off rival slander or outright bids to wrest you from office.

It doesn't help that *The Guild 2* ships with technical issues: characters that disappear into walls, visual artifacts that take a restart to clear, buttons that don't work at all, and drop-sync issues with multiplayer games. Fans of the original have cause for modest excitement...but not before developer 4Head gets things patched up to snuff. • **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

+ **Rich, immersive RTS/RPG synthesis meets *The Sims*; wonderful medieval visuals.**
− **Too much to manage at once, even with automation; extremely glitchy.**

6/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

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WELCOME TO THE ADVENTURES OF SIR HICKSALOT DEATHBOOT IN THE LAND OF THE CONSPICUOUSLY PLACED SPIKE RACKS.

Generic Scary Underground Temple Thingie.

Wait, wait, I'm not a melee class!

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

These boots were made for kicking

Ubisoft | Arkane Studios/Kuju | Fantasy Action | Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com) | Mature
2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard | 2-32 players | Gold Master

REVIEW

***Dark Messiah* is littered** with racks of spikes, conveniently propped upright with the sharpy sides pointing outward. There are also walkways without railings and open fires everywhere. Racks of heavy barrels or marble sarcophagi are precariously held overhead by creaky wooden beams. It is an OSHA inspector's wet dream.

The message is clear. "Use the kick button!" is all but written in neon. With a simple thrust of one of your very visible legs—bound appropriately to the "F" key—you can dispatch enemies with ease. Impale them on spikes, push them off cliffs, and shove them into fires where they'll light up as if they'd been marinated in lighter fluid. It's the fantasy world equivalent of guards who insist on standing next to explosive barrels. Welcome to *The Adventures of Sir Kicksalot Deathboot in the Land of the Conspicuously Placed Spike Racks*.

ALL ABOOT!...I MEAN, ALL ABOARD!

There's an early mission where you have to defend the gangplank to a ship while enemies run up singly and try to board. By the time you've kicked the 15th guy into the water, his limbs flailing wildly as if you'd kicked the bones clean out of him, you have to wonder if *Dark Messiah* was supposed to play this way. Your simple boot regularly upstages magic, stealth, archery, and combat, all of which are represented in the basic skill tree. No matter which "class" you choose, it will behoove you to play a Kicklord.

But this isn't an RPG so much as an action game—a corridor shooter, to be more precise—with RPG elements. There are a few nods to broader gameplay, such as weaponcrafting and book reading. These seem like vestiges of someone's bright idea to try to be like *Oblivion*. Otherwise, it's quickly clear that *Dark Messiah* is a *Half-Life 2*–style rail ride, but with *Deus Ex*–style character development.

Unfortunately, the character development is pretty much a matter of what you want to do besides swing your sword and kick your foot. Magery is hobbled by the fact that you can't also use a weapon while you've got your magic-drenched hands equipped. Your stealth won't help you fend off the swarms of giant spiders you'll perennially face, not to mention all those times you misjudge whether you can be seen. Do you enjoy carefully hoarding arrows? If so, archery is for you.

For everyone else there's hand-to-hand combat. The spirited melee is an admirable attempt to breathe some gory life into this otherwise drab fantasy game. It's got a "You Are There and You're Totally Kicking Ass/Getting Your Ass Kicked!" vibe. The camera jerks around to suggest the viewpoint of someone getting beaned by a mace, or lunging forward to skewer a fallen orc, or being picked up by a 20-foot-tall cyclops who roars in your face before flinging you across the room.

The visceral thrill of this clang and slash is pretty much the only thing that keeps *Dark Messiah* moving forward. Because it's certainly not the leveling, and it sure as hell isn't the storyline, in which you're led by the nose through a rigidly linear world that quite literally is about going there and back again. It even reuses every boss creature at least twice. Remember that dragon you killed? Well, you didn't.

THE DEMON WHO LOVED ME

There's a slutty demon chick in your head (and eventually elsewhere, too) who reminds you to do things like, "Use the rope bow" if you get stuck and occasionally offers droll single entendres. This Cortana wannabe is a foil to the girl-next-door mage chick you'll have to rescue a few times. You can easily guess where the ham-handed love triangle is going, and the Dark Secret™ is pretty obvious early on. The visuals are as uninspired as the story. The Source engine has never looked worse than it does in these dimly lit, rotely drawn dungeons infested with technical glitches like stuttering sound and disappearing polygons.

At least the multiplayer is an attempt at something different (i.e., something that hasn't been done in the series since 2001's *Legends of Might and Magic*). You'll have to install Valve's Steam and you'll have to power through some absurdly long loading times. No, your system hasn't crashed. But once you get past these hurdles, you're in a refreshing fantasy take on *Unreal Tournament's* assault mode. The multiplayer goes back and forth over the course of several maps, which increasingly favor the losing team. The whole time, you're earning experience for new abilities, which change up the gameplay. Immediately after *Dark Messiah's* release, there was a lot of fumbling around, with most players inclined to play warriors wildly swinging their swords. But there's lots of tactical potential here that should appease anyone interested in getting more than a few kicks from *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*. ● **Tom Chick**

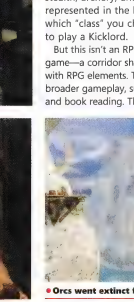
VERDICT

- Multiplayer.
- Single-player.

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows



● **Orcs went extinct for want of guardrails.**

● **Go online and face warriors like Death4u.**

● **We are the Knights Who Say "Unngghhhhhh!"**

The in-game Halloween 2006 celebration featured the return of Mad King Thorn, who bore gifts to anyone willing to sit through his routine.

GUILD WARS NIGHTFALL

Live together, die alone

PUBLISHER: NCsoft | DEVELOPER: ArenaNet | GENRE: Action-MMORPG | AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.guildwars.com) | ESRB RATING: Teen | MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space, *Guild Wars* and *Guild Wars Factions* (recommended) | MULTIPLAYER: Massively so | VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

EDITOR'S CHOICE Games for Windows

The original *Guild Wars* proved that "massively multiplayer" doesn't automatically equal "monthly fee," and the more recent *Factions* follow-up eliminated all leftover notions of level-grinding. Now, with its "you never fight alone" tagline, campaign No. 3—*Nightfall*—ironically assures us that it's OK to shun the company of others.

Nightfall comes complete with the usual *Guild Wars* bells 'n' whistles: a pair of new professions (see sidebar) to complement the six core classes, new abilities for existing classes, a story-driven campaign, and complete independence from previous chapters (no prior experience necessary). But the most noteworthy addition comes in the form of 14 new nonplayer hero characters who—unlike the addlebrained henchmen of campaigns past—offer complete customization options to players. You can tweak these heroes' weapons, armor, and skills to your heart's content and order them around the battlefield in a sort of pseudo-RTS fashion that virtually eliminates the typical "provoke everything in sight" default henchman behavior. It saves a lot of headaches...and makes *Guild Wars* feel more like a single-player RPG than ever before.

NIGHTFALL! NIGHTFALL, I TELL YOU!

The plot's some trite fantasy gibberish involving a generic eeeeeeevil zealot's gambit to resurrect the world's biggest and baddest (and previously unmentioned) dark god via a catastrophic event called—you guessed it—Nightfall. The key NPCs basically spend the entire campaign yammering about how, "Nightfall is coming! Nightfall is upon us!" to the extent that it feels like an advertisement for a product you already own. But hey, at least they do it with mouths that finally *move during cut-scenes*. Bless that cutting-edge 2006 technology!

Silly story aside, the campaign shines. The pacing's on par with *Factions*, and the game's 20 missions present lots of replay incentive thanks to a tiered reward system (though you'll likely pull your hair out during one late-game sequence that pairs you with a giant sandworm). One area, Tihark Orchard, stands out: Instead of the usual monster bashing, this mission tasks you with attending a royal party where you must participate in various festivities in an effort to recruit a trio of nobles. At one point, you're challenged to a mime fight—an emote contest with an NPC. How's that for unconventional?

The entire game's laced with similar bits of geek humor, including a duo of complementary skills that reference Tim Allen's catchphrase from *Galaxy Quest* ("Never Give Up!" and "Never Surrender!"). *Nightfall*'s certainly a game that knows its audience... and if you aren't a part of that audience yet, this is unequivocally the best place to indoctrinate yourself.

Ryan Scott

VERDICT

- **Awesome hero NPCs; good new classes; a lengthy, good-humored campaign.**
- **Clichéd story; a ridiculous extended sequence involving giant desert worms.**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

CLASS ACTS

Nightfall's new professions put the two middling Assassin and Ranger classes to shame. First up: the Dervish, a scythe-wielding melee/spellcasting hybrid who juggles enchantment spells and beats the Assassin at the "secondary tank" role. And if ranged combat's more your style, the spear-throwing Paragon combines some of the best aspects of the core Warrior and Ranger classes, making for a handy group-focused backup fighter.

My Ranger/Mesmer packs a mean poison/fire/health degeneration combo.

WARHAMMER: MARK OF CHAOS

Cure for the grit fit

● While you'll officially play as Elves, Empire, Skaven, and Chaos, sub-factions and mercs add in unique heroes and extras like Dwarves, Orcs, Giants, Goblins, and Trolls.

PUBLISHER Namco Bandai DEVELOPER Black Hole GENRE Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY Retail ESRB RATING Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players VERSION REVIEWED Gold Master

REVIEW

***Mark of Chaos* plays in fits** and starts over grungy fields of mud or ice, with gothic villas hugging crescent palisades or stacked in baileys behind castle battlements. It's about defending flak-bitten ramparts with Empire halberdiers as warp-lightning cannons snap like ectoplasmic spark-guns, or sneaking under walls with chittering Skaven gutter runners to scope for enemy intel. Swivel and click, flank or charge, duel or flee, you're either untangling flailing throngs of Orcs, Goblins, Rat Ogres, Elves, and Chaos-spawn...or creeping along fogged-over vistas, scanning for range-closing pistoliers, archers, axe-throwers, and poisoned wind globadiers. Lose first dibs to a Chaos hellcannon at your peril.

● Complementing Jeremy Soule's predictably stellar soundtrack, *Mark of Chaos*'s units sound terrific, including hilarious one-liners like "Be ungentle in your attentions," or "Pray and slay!"

TOTAL WARHAMMER

For all its stylistic bluster, *MOC* is *not* a faithful translation of the *Warhammer* fantasy tabletop rules, but were you really expecting it to be? If instead you'd like a cup of real-time *Warhammer* that's like the *Total War* series' tactical battles—only with magic, monsters, and that trademark "grim world" panache—this is that game. To *Warhammer* hardcores, that might sound like nerfing. It's not. You still have facing, flanking, and charging with *Warhammer*-like unit attributes such as "fear," "frenzy," and "unbreakable." High terrain lets you fire farther (and increases your defense versus units charging uphill), while fighting in streams and rivers makes you more vulnerable. Fleeing units are easier to hit, and tight (versus loose) formations defend better against area attacks. Suffice to say, it's not lack of detail that turns out to be *MOC*'s Achilles' heel, but rather, too few ways of letting that detail sing out.

Flanking, for instance, is supposed to increase damage and morale loss, but it's tough to get a sense of anything unusual happening when you slam a regiment of Empire cavalry sideways into a gaggle of Rat Ogres. Charging suffers the same problem, and it's a real mess sorting things out when you get into scrums where unit overlap turns organized regiments into brawling blobs. In short, you get plenty of detail under the hood, but too few helpful barometers. The designers claim those criticisms—along with missing features like friendly fire (an inexplicable omission)—will be addressed in an upcoming patch, but as it stands, *MOC* lacks some key elements, hobbling the overall experience.

DUELING TOOL

The only cast-iron sore point is dueling, where opposing heroes enter a little circle and start whaling on each other (if you're into tabletop, think "challenges"). Your level of engagement is to let special abilities rip by tapping buttons on recharge timers. No clever animations, no finishing moves—just two tanks trading blows (may the one with the most healing potions win). Thanks, but no thanks.

That said, it's hard not to fall under *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos*' "almost-there" spell. Factor in two well-written campaigns (one for Empire, one for Chaos) that let you upgrade your army and buff heroes' combat and command skill trees, as well as an elastic army composer for online battles. Prize-winning? No, but certainly promising...if we can hold our breath for fixes. ● **Matt Peckham**

MARK OF CHAOS LACKS SOME IMPORTANT ELEMENTS, HOBBLING THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE.

VERDICT

- ✚ **Translates rather than transplants the tabletop miniatures rules.**
- ✚ **Poor tactical feedback; click-frenzy hero dueling.**

7/10
GOOD
Games for Windows

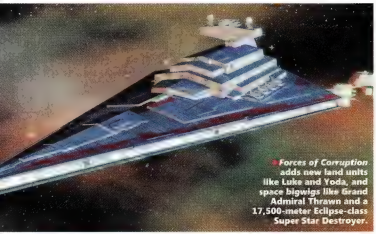
STAR WARS: EMPIRE AT WAR—FORCES OF CORRUPTION

We're fresh out of witty *Star Wars* quotes right now

PUBLISHER: LucasArts DEVELOPER: Petroglyph GENRE: Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail Box ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, *Star Wars: Empire at War* MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

Those crazy kiddos at LucasArts certainly love 'em some *Star Wars*. They even laced our review kits with dossiers on their new expansion's faction leader, Tyber Zann, including his eye color, birthday, and height (in inches *and* meters). Can you blame them? *Empire at War* is the best *Star Wars* RTS going, even if it drops to a more vanilla "pretty decent" when you drag it into the pitiless glare of a year that's brought us minor miracles like *Company of Heroes* and *The Battle for Middle-earth II*.



Forces of Corruption adds new land units like Luke and Yoda, and space bigwigs like Grand Admiral Thrawn and a 17,500-meter Eclipse-class Super Star Destroyer.

Forces of Corruption supplements with a guerrilla-smuggler faction, but also adds more heroes (Luke, Yoda, Bossk, IG-88) and a new story-driven campaign that lets you "corrupt" planets and more-or-less coexist with the Empire or Rebellion, taking your profits in the shadows. Of course, you'll still want to skirt around the stuff that works no better here than before. Even with devious saboteurs and cloaking transports, land battles remain mazelike and boring and, for all its clever slipstreaming, the new campaign feels like the same tedious planet-plod with an insider angle.

Still, the *Forces of Corruption* expansion is worth some kudos, if only because it packs the sucker with enough new units that you can spend *all* your time with only 33 percent of the game (the exceptional space battles, which I'd pay full price to play by their lonesome) and still feel like you're getting your 30 bucks' worth. ● **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

+ Brimming with new content; new units add more love to the terrific space battles.

– The new campaign feels like the old campaign with fly-on-the-wall tech.

6/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

DISTANT GUNS: THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR AT SEA, 1904-05

Tsushima? I barely knew her!

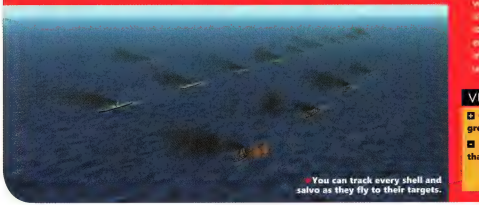
PUBLISHER: Storm Eagle Studios DEVELOPER: Storm Eagle Studios GENRE: Historical Naval Simulation AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.stormeaglestudios.com) ESRB RATING: Not Rated
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 275MB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2+ players VERSION REVIEWED: E-tail Download

REVIEW

The split between gaming and simulation in war gaming is one of the geekiest conflicts imaginable, and it's hard to think of a game that illustrates this dichotomy better than Norm Koger's *Distant Guns*. It's not surprising that the designer of *The Operational Art of War* made this game, because it has exactly the same philosophy: Put as much of the real world into the game as possible, and then let people play with it. This game is an homage to all the toy boats we played with as kids.

Distant Guns covers the naval campaign in the Russo-Japanese War, and does it with a 3D engine that demonstrates this fact. A good eye for design is much better than a lot of polygons. An unorthodox—but quickly mastered—interface allows you to give orders to individual ships as they toss shells and launch torpedoes at the enemy battle line. But, because of the subject matter, the pace is incredibly slow, and this requires a keen appreciation for the whole enterprise of digitally re-creating battles that are often decided as soon as they begin, simply by the disposition of forces. Tactics are sometimes subtle, but often the choices are obvious.

Playing *Distant Guns* often comes down to watching the battle from above, then zooming in to admire your battleships' salvos. Players looking for a clear-cut game will find this decidedly lacking. War gamers looking for an absorbing simulation to study will gladly pay the unusually high price of $65. ● **Bruce Geryk**



You can track every shell and salvo as they fly to their targets.

VERDICT

+ Great rendering of a great historical period.

+ Much more watching than playing.

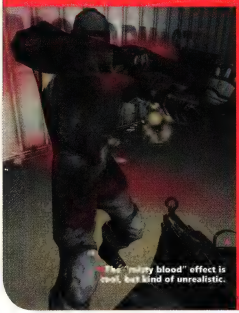
7/10 GOOD

Games for Windows

F.E.A.R.: EXTRACTION POINT

Point-counterpoint

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Games DEVELOPER: TimeGate GENRE: Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, *F.E.A.R.* MULTIPLAYER: 2-12 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable



The "misty blood" effect is cool, but kind of unrealistic.

REVIEW

Here's the specs of the system on which I played *F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point*: Intel Core 2 Duo 2.67GHz CPU, 1GB DDR2 RAM, 850GB RAID 0 disk array, and Nvidia 7950 GT graphics card. Does your system exceed those specs? If not, you can forget about running this game at anything approaching max resolution—even that beast couldn't max it out without chugging and lagging. Consider yourself warned.

If you don't mind turning down the settings a bit, though, you *F.E.A.R.* fans will find *Extraction Point* an enjoyable extension of the original. While publisher Vivendi went with TimeGate rather than Monolith (the original's designer) for this expansion's development, you wouldn't know the difference. No—I mean you really wouldn't know the difference. *Extraction Point* sports some new weapons (the coolest is the minigun, with which you can "juggle" dead bodies), some slightly improved enemy A.I., and a few wider-open maps, but is otherwise identical to its parent game.

So, if you dug the original and yearn for more atmospheric horror, challenging A.I., and sweet, sweet eye candy—you've got yourself another six to eight hours of thoroughly competent game. But if you felt *F.E.A.R.* was too linear, that the enemies weren't varied enough, or that the multiplayer was weak, *Extraction Point* won't make a flip-flopper out of you. ● **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

- **Same as ever: fantastic visual effects, solid A.I., creepy atmosphere.**
- **Same as ever: repetitive level design, tepid multiplayer, ridiculous specs.**

7/10
GOOD
Games for Windows

ROBOBLITZ

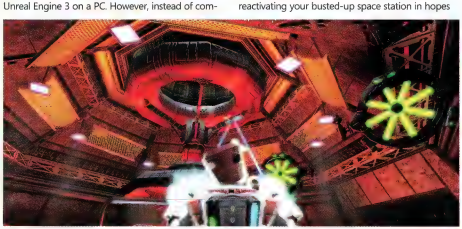
The squeaky wheel gets the Unreal 3

PUBLISHER: Valve Software DEVELOPER: Naked Sky Entertainment GENRE: Action AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.steampowered.com) ESRB RATING: Everyone 10+
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4000MB hard drive space, 256MB videocard (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Final E-tail

REVIEW

Incredible detailed textures. Ageia's physics engine in action. If you have 15 bucks in your pocket, you have a front-row seat for a glimpse at Unreal Engine 3 on a PC. However, instead of coming in with the bang of a flak cannon, it's on the squeaky wheel of a quirky robot named Blitz.

Our slightly rusted hero may have a couple of upgradeable laser blasters bolted to his arms, but *RoboBlitz* isn't some *Unreal*-based FPS—it's a fun little platformer. The heart of the game centers on reactivating your busted-up space station in hopes of repelling the villainous MegaNOED and his robominions. Yes, the plot's fairly disposable, but the game exudes enough personality to keep you playing (among other things, you fight giant refugees from a robotic smiley-face factory).



● **With a quick shot from your stun beam, you can briefly drop these flying fans.**

The only unfortunate part is that the fun ends fast. Given a couple hours, you'll probably breeze through most of *RoboBlitz*...but then again, you're definitely getting your money's worth. At least all the pieces are there for you to enjoy—interesting gear, a controllable point-to-point gravity beam that lets you monkey with in-game physics, and some puzzles thrown in for good measure. If you're jonesing for a little more, try your hand at creating a few levels with the editor. Fifteen bones is a drop in the bucket for this quick fix. ● **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **$15 games just don't look this good...**
- **...but they *are* this short.**

6/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

RANK-RESTRICTED UNLOCKS SEDUCE THE SAME COLLECTO-MANIAC INSIDE MMORPGERS.

Massively mobile boarding pods work well for Titan blitzes.

EMP missiles ground gunships with impunity.

Hover beside or below a Titan and trash its belly turrets for multiple medals.

BATTLEFIELD 2142

Future imperfect

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **DICE Stockholm** GENRE: **Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (downloader.ea.com)** SERP RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.7GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, broadband Internet** MULTIPLAYER: **2-64 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

It has neither the Mustang's history nor the Humvee's headlines, but, clomping center stage, the battle walker is the face of *2142*'s far-out, far-off future—a future foreseen not to pose "what ifs," not to predict "what wills," only to plant the franchise somewhere—anywhere—that sells. And so we find a planet encased in Pleistocene ice (liquid, solid, it's still watered down), with unlived-in-looking streets, and ho-hum science (suppose developer DICE averaged all available futurist standards to arrive at its wheeled getabouts and winged flyers). What's in question here isn't whether this or that technology is hooey—it's impoverished, store-brand imagination.

One thing about the battle walker: Though recklessly wobbly, it's utterly lethal and a load of fun for it. *MechWarrior*-like and all right angles, it's *2142*'s life-taker and moneymaker, surrogate to *BF2*'s multirole jets, only stoppable where the J10 and MiG-29 weren't. This is a ground pounder's game, in which infantry's rock and armor's paper write air power's supposed scissors out of the picture, as DICE deems flyboys obsolete, nipping the bud by nerfing them altogether. No biggie if that's never been your thing—in fact, if its not, file "grounding do-nothing gunships via electromagnetic missile" under "reasons to buy."

MASH OF THE TITANS

Clipped wings diminish *Battlefield*'s depth and breadth, but Titan mode is a counterweight. In addition to seizing capture points (now called SAM silos), you sink the other side's commander-controlled flying fortress—first nuking its shields Death Star–style, and then boarding the thing in pods before mushroom-clouding its reactor core. Since Titans themselves are maps-within-a-map, matches hop from anywhere/everywhere freedom to *Team Fortress*–style choke pointing. I'd call that a complete success if not for the following snafus: 1) Titans in transit generate space-time wonkiness as servers wrestle to pair player-to-ship movement. Never mind listed ping: Actual latency screams 56K. 2) Claymores, pop-up shields, and shaped charges designed for field deployment spell stalemate in the hands of determined Titan defenders—especially shields that, whether by bug or bad idea, can seal some corridors. 3) Dumbbell teammates who know neither to fortify their Titan nor harass those of their foes are a third fault; however, point multipliers awarded for in-ship frags ought to promote tactical play over time.

Pin the appeal of *2142*'s other twist on "carrot" psychology. Introduced in *BF2* and unpacked here, rank-restricted unlocks seduce the same collecto-maniac inside MMORPGers. Optic spoofs, personal UAVs, and 40 other perks favor pros over noobs; still, the lure of "one more rank, one more unlock" makes play irresistible even while play itself isn't so standout—and that holds true despite a full half of-*2142*'s for-the-winning gear being available from the get-go in *Battlefields* before it and despite a quarter of it being all but useless. ● **Shawn Elliott**

VERDICT

- **Addicting player promotion program.**
- **Buggy and superficially bland.**

6/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

SEVEN SINS

1 As in *Battlefield 2*, some servers neither register players' rank nor record their accomplishments at times. DICE says it's working to resolve the error.

2 *2142* users must also install advertising technology developed by IGA Worldwide Inc. CEO Justin Townsend tells gaming news site Gamasutra.com that, "IGA's software uses IP addresses for geo-targeting in-game ads. It also creates a unique user number that is able to indentify the gamer when he next appears online." Townsend adds that advertisers are generating game-specific ads to better blend their content with *2142*'s setting. Because the hard-to-reach audience of future soldiers with five-minute life expectancies is hot, hot, hot.

3 Punkbuster cheat prevention isn't auto-updating, causing servers to boot players. Pick up files and follow installation instructions available at www.evenbalance.com/index.php?page=dl-bf1942.php.

4 Another commonly occurring bug makes battle walkers both skate across the surface without appearing to walk and march in place when they're supposed to stand still, reducing accuracy. Less often, a player may discover that the selectable spawn point on his Titan has disappeared.

5 Moving Titans create massive performance problems, making combat impossible inside ships and causing bodies to slide through walls before medics can resuscitate them.

6 Newbies often make token mention of team killing. Intentional TKing, however, is not and has never been an issue in *BF2* and *BF2142*, as victims are able to punish offenders (punishment maximizes point loss and leads to kicking/banning). What's wrong is the ease with which one can accidentally off allies (pilots, for instance, are fatsted when disembarking passengers die). Furthermore, it's possible for griefers to force TKs on unsuspecting players simply by guiding one vehicle into another, even in friendly fire-free games. Now that points matter more than ever, losing them to foul play is twice as infuriating.

7 Limited vehicle variety (16 in total counting Titans as well as PAC and EU skin swaps compared to *Battlefield 1942*'s 43) suggests that EA's withholding content for future sale in booster and expansion packs.

SCARFACE: THE WORLD IS YOURS

Say good night to the bad guy

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Games** DEVELOPER: **Radical Entertainment** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.direct2drive.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.8GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.9GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

I can't play this game in front of my wife. Heck, I can only play it late at night when no one's around. *Scarface: The World Is Yours* features so much violence, bloodshed, guns, and colorful language that it's embarrassing to get caught indulging in it. The classic Brian De Palma film never descends this far into excess. Credit Al Pacino for walking that fine line between drama and cartoon but blame the game for stepping over that line too many times.

This descent into killing sprees is a failing of computer games. If you were to remove the film license, the mechanics would stand up well enough; missions aren't especially unique, but they're well positioned in the overarching story. The time in between is spent building your empire by selling drugs, crushing rival gangs, and doing other entertaining gamey things like racing cars around town, winning cleverly disguised minigames, and shooting up Miami for thrills.

That's where things diverge from what Pacino's Tony Montana stands for in the film. Pacino created a human, not a game automaton. But *The World Is Yours* disposes of any softness by offing Tony's momma early on, even turning you loose with a chain saw—something Tony himself seems to find unrealistic and beneath him in the infamous film scene. Montana is a complex, fire character, but his game is a gruesome, blunt-action built around a proven formula for player interaction. ● **David J. Long**

VERDICT

- ✚ **Solid *Grand Theft Auto*–style driving, shooting, and running.**
- ✚ **Depth of the film lost under genre conventions; rudimentary 2002-era looks.**

6/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

RESERVOIR DOGS

Some super sounds of the '70s

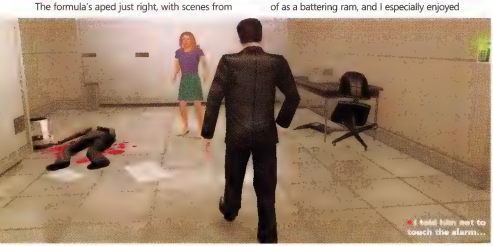
PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Volatile Games** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

***Reservoir Dogs* is like** the side-scrollers that every movie spawned in the '90s. The formula's aped just right, with scenes from the classic Tarantino flick tied together by linear levels—you get the film's plot, some fan fiction (i.e., no filmmaker input), and an action game all in one.

It's not bad while it lasts; few games put such emphasis on using your gun as a deterrent instead of as a battering ram, and I especially enjoyed snapping hostages headfirst into a desk to get the cops' attention midrobbery, which let me disarm the officers and escape without firing a shot. Go ahead and shoot first all the time if you like, but it's more entertaining to play a pro instead of a psycho. You also earn a different ending if you go all Mr. Blonde on people ("If they hadn't done what I told 'em not to do, they'd still be alive!") instead of trying to keep it cool like Mr. White ("I ain't no madman.").

Gunfire sounds are superb. That scene where Mr. Pink unloads a clip into the cops before he drives off with the diamonds? It sounds just like that. Even the voice acting's OK. The whole thing's over in a few hours, but it makes for cheap fun after you watch the film for the 50th time. ● **David J. Long**



VERDICT

- ✚ **Captures the look and sound of the film; hostage-taking is unique and vital.**
- ✚ **Super-short; a few technical glitches; limited variety.**

5/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

JAWS UNLEASHED

The world's first self-jumping shark

PUBLISHER: Majesco DEVELOPER: Appaloosa Interactive GENRE: Pre-environment Shark Simulator AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, gamepad (recommended) MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Xbox

REVIEW

● **I'm a freaking *shark*. Shouldn't the goal—*in every level*—just be "eat as many people as possible"? Can't I at least smash the door open with my big shark head?**

● **LAND SHARK!**

Cashing in on classic film franchises is a popular move for hack game developers these days (just look at the rest of this spread for ample proof). In the case of *Jaws Unleashed*, the license got glommed onto a previous shark tale titled *Sole Predator*, originally announced in 2003 and then delayed to the point of entirely missing *Jaws*' 30th anniversary. Which begs the question: What the *hell* did developer Appaloosa do for the past three years?

Whatever the answer, *Jaws Unleashed* clearly wasn't high on the priority list, as the entire game's an exercise in pure stupidity. You play the titular great white in a vaguely *Grand Theft Auto*–esque open environment, rampaging around Amity Island and terrorizing the locals (or trying to, at least) while fulfilling a series of story objectives that revolve around a lame eco-friendly agenda. That's right: You're an environmentally-aware killer shark.

Last time I checked, Jaws mauled beachgoers because *that's what killer sharks do*. Here, your murder spree is couched in goals like "find an I.D. card!" and "destroy the refinery!" that usually boil down to egregiously clumsy trial-and-error as you wrestle with horrid controls and an ever-draining "hunger" bar (Quick! Feed Jaws before he starves to death!). Even the basic people-eating routine's busted, as you usually wind up wiggling Jaws back into the water after running him aground mid-mangle. This game's no shark—it's a bottom-feeder. ● **Ryan Scott**

VERDICT

- **None whatsoever.**
- **Horrible camera and controls; ridiculously difficult goals; awful level design.**

1/10
TERRIBLE
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

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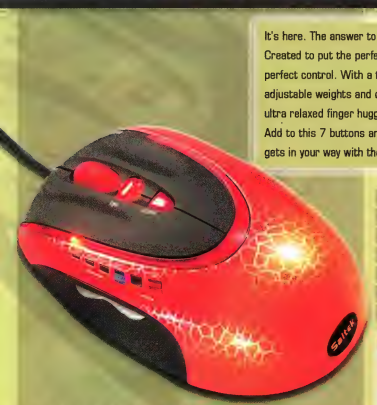

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TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 07

Déjà vu all over again

PUBLISHER: EA Sports DEVELOPER: EA Redwood Shores GENRE: Sports AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.3GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2-4 players VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07 is the best PC golf game on the shelves today. It's also damned near the *only* PC golf game these days. Ironically, its strongest competition comes from *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*—and it's not too clear-cut as to which game's better.

Tiger Woods 07 includes a wealth of entertaining gaming options that make it more than just a golf-physics simulation. All of the normal stuff, such as matches, stroke play, and skins, is here. The new "Team Mode" challenges you to build a team with which you can take on Tiger and his fearsome foursome. An addictive role-playing mode casts you as a hacker hustling your buddies and playing local tournaments, working your way up to Q-school and ultimately a spot on the PGA Tour.

For anyone but Tiger, this shot's going in the water.

It's a great golf game, but as series fanatics can see, it doesn't have much more than its predecessor (aside from some new bugs—e.g., lies have no apparent effect on your shot). Additionally, the PC version ships with a mere 12 courses versus the 21 on consoles. EA informed us that it has no plans to release a course architect for *Tiger Woods 07*, and courses designed under *Tiger Woods 06*'s architect experience significant issues when imported into *Tiger Woods 07*. That alone may make last year's edition, with its wealth of community-designed courses available, a better choice for armchair golfers. ■ **Jeff Lackey**

VERDICT

- **Game modes that even nongolf fanatics will enjoy.**
- **Not much different from last year's version; a lack of a course architect means no new community courses.**

6/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

FIFA 07

All that's missing are the hooligans

PUBLISHER: EA Sports DEVELOPER: EA Canada GENRE: Sports AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.3GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.7GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2-4 players REVIEWED VERSION: Retail Box

Depending on the videocard, *FIFA 07* will look very different to different people.

REVIEW

EA Sports sequels rarely overwhelm the senses. They don't terribly underwhelm, either—they usually just... wheim. But *FIFA*'s different. Perhaps driven by constant pressure from Konami's excellent *Winning Eleven* series, EA's canned the complacency and cranked up the innovation. Consequently, the *FIFA* of today is better than ever.

Is *FIFA 07* real soccer? No. The thought processes and reactions are too acute, the minute-to-minute fatigue too subtle, and the scores too high. And the maximum length of each half (10 real-time minutes) is unreasonably brief. However, the sensory side of the game—including a new eerily reactive crowd and a gamut of authentic player movements—is beyond reproach.

But it's the credibility and the fun of the gameplay that'll keep you captivated. The graduated buildup, the tactical maneuvering, the necessity for tic-tac-toe passing, the sprint for open ground—it's all very believable. The new "finesse shot," involving one extra button to decrease power and improve accuracy, adds yet another weapon to an impressive arsenal of ball control and attack options. And you need 'em all, as (minor A.I. glitches aside) *FIFA 07*'s defenders and goalkeepers are a tenacious bunch.

They're even more so when governed by a talented player in the new "interactive" online mode. Indeed, you may have your last-ever humiliation chronicled audibly via *FIFA*'s weekly podcast feature. With 500-plus teams, a management component to which players can actually improve, and a host of upgrades, *FIFA 07* gives *Winning Eleven* some serious competition. ■ **Gord Goble**

VERDICT

- **More ball-movement options than ever; good multiplayer enhancements.**
- **Incidental players are not perfect; games limited to 20 minutes.**

8/10
GOOD
Games for Windows

NHL EASTSIDE HOCKEY MANAGER 2007

Could you have more fun in a suit?

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Sports Interactive** GENRE: **Sports** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.eastsidehockeymanager.net)** ESRB RATING: **Everyone**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **500MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 800MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2-24 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **E-tail Download**

REVIEW

Remember when the sports genre was all about...sports? When players spent their entire careers with a single team? Today, your favorite sports talk-show host likely babbles more about the latest front-office maneuver than the latest last-second victory. It's this growing interest in the *business* of sports that makes management sims so relevant. One of the best and certainly one of the most comprehensive is Sports Interactive's *NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2007*.

EHM delves deep into the global hockey fabric, encompassing more than 20 professional and junior leagues from around the world and no less than 45,000 real players. Budding hockey moguls can begin wherever they want and run their organization as they see fit, moving through the game's multiple interfaces and its gargantuan storehouse of objective and subjective information with the knowledge that they'll rarely encounter programming-imposed restrictions. Indeed, the sense of total freedom offered here is downright enthralling.

Unfortunately, the game's few downsides are undeniably glaring. Interface navigation, for example, is counter-intuitive and more than a bit cumbersome. Secondary statistics are sometimes flawed. And online play is limited to 16 owners, even though the NHL has 30 teams.

Nevertheless, some impressively complex stuff is at work here. The game responds well to even the subtlest decisions, looks far prettier than most managerial sims, and even features a workable top-down 2D "tactical view" of each match—complete with appropriate sound effects. If you have the patience, this one could suck you in for a good long while. ● **Gord Goble**

● **Hands-on hockey bosses will appreciate *EHM*'s "Tactical View."**

VERDICT

- **Comprehensive player database; superior sense of freedom; detailed gameplay.**
- **Cumbersome interface; some statistical oddities.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

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MARVEL: ULTIMATE ALLIANCE

Fantastically formulaic fun fare!

PUBLISHER Activision **DEVELOPER** Raven/Beenox **GENRE** Action-RPG **AVAILABILITY** Retail **ESRB RATING** Teen **MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS** 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (gamepad recommended) **MULTIPLAYER** 2-4 players **VERSION REVIEWED** Gold Master

REVIEW

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance is pretty much like picking up the latest issue of *Uncanny X-Men*. It's the latest in an established franchise with a set formula, doesn't have many surprises, and tends to rely on your love of Marvel lore to make up for its flaws. *MUA* evolves just enough to justify its existence as a separate game from *X-Men Legends I* and *II*, but these "advancements" feel more like reveals to the core formula.

Some such tweaks: Health potions get replaced by instant health orbs, heroes possess fewer (but more well-defined) powers, and alternate costumes modify stats and team-leveling bonuses received for using a "personalized" team of the same four heroes for an extended time). Essentially, anyone who's played the XML games knows what to expect here. What's left is how much the Marvel Universe appeals to you—*MUA* manages to cram in everything from Dr. Doom to Fin Fang Foom.

As a proto-nerd who knows what MODOK is an acronym for, I wholeheartedly ate up the fan service. Sure, the game doesn't explain why Deadpool and Ghost Rider would team up, but the fact that I'm able to have Deadpool crack wise while Ghost Rider pulls his mystic chains is enough reason for me. If the idea of wielding the power cosmic as the Silver Surfer doesn't immediately add points for you, then *MUA* is simply a solid (yet not particularly noteworthy) action RPG. ● **Thierry Nguyen**

● You get bonuses putting together certain character combos (like this all-female team).

VERDICT

- **Great fan service for Marvel nerds.**
- **Underneath said fan service is a rehash of the *X-Men Legends* formula.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

THE SIMS 2: PETS

Cats rule, dogs drool

PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Maxis **GENRE** Simulation **AVAILABILITY** Retail **ESRB RATING** Everyone **MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS** 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB hard drive space, *The Sims 2* **MULTIPLAYER** None **VERSION REVIEWED** Gold Master

REVIEW

In the background, I can hear my real dog barking...but my eyes are glued to the screen as I feed my Sim's dog, play fetch with her, and watch her bark at the cat. Just like the first three *Sims 2* expansions, *Pets* has the same addictive qualities—especially if you're a pet lover—that make some of us forget our real lives.

Just as with the humans, you can customize your pet's looks and personality to create a unique dog or cat (or parrot or hamster) for your Sim. Having so many options can intimidate, but the end result is an incredibly cute animal. And I'm not just saying that as a 12-year-old girl—even my dad, *GFW* editor-in-chief Jeff Green, squealed embarrassingly when he saw the cuddly dog I created.

But the actual game isn't just about looks, as these animals aren't all good: They can destroy the couch, soil the rug, and dig up your lawn. You can't control the animals directly, so they can do whatever they please. Sometimes they won't even fulfill their basic needs; you just have to sit there and watch them get more and more miserable.

In general, though, *Pets* shows great attention to detail (such as what dogs versus cats can and can't do), and the wide variety of choices minimizes boredom. Cat care is superior to dog care if you want to enjoy other aspects of *The Sims 2* because—surprise—cats aren't as needy. Dogs require so much intense care that it's hard to focus on anything else, which gets frustrating. Still, pet lovers will love this expansion. Everyone else can safely skip it. ● **Sarah Jaisser Green**

● Dogs and cats living together—mass hysteria!

VERDICT

- **Lots of pet customization; tons to do; very cute.**
- **Overly demanding and time-consuming dog care.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

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2006 AWARDS

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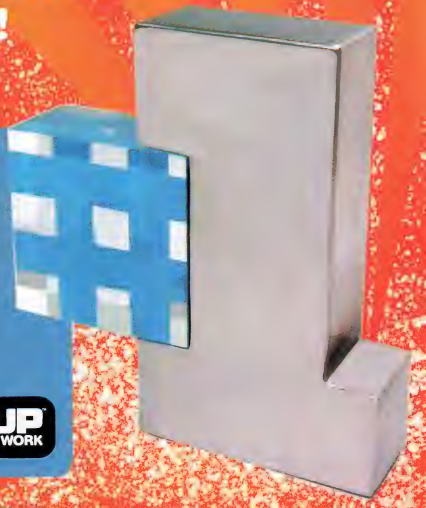

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2006 Game of the Year
Action
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Fighting
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Online/Multiplayer
Racing
RPG
Shooter
Sports
Strategy

1UP NETWORK

Train upgrades become available as time passes depending on the year. You'll want to upgrade, but tread carefully—newest isn't always best.

SID MEIER'S RAILROADS!

Prettier, sleeker, and tinier

PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Firaxis Games GENRE: Economic Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1.7GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2-4 players REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

How cool's a name like "Sid"? Think about it. Would you buy *Rufus Meier's Alpha Centauri*? How about *Eugene Meier's Civilization*? And when Sid drops that full John Hancock behind stuff like *Gettysburg!* and *Pirates!*, does an angel get its wings? When it comes to *Railroads!*, the answer is "not quite." But hey, you can only have so many angels, right?

ALL ABOARD!

The good news: *Sid Meier's Railroads!* is an all-around likable update of the original *Railroad Tycoon* (1990) that winks respectfully at torchbearer PopTop's followup *Tycoons II* and *3*, then gutsily reimagines the series as a cuter, cozier, supply-and-demand contest that looks a bit like playing a board game in a sandbox with buckets of choo-chooing parts.

Did I say "cozy"? Here comes the bad news: Right away, you'll notice the maps aren't just *like* playing in a sandbox, but pretty much the *size* of one. That's fine early on when you're minding a city or two, but with more than two players, the trackage starts crisscrossing confusingly until it looks like a ride in *RollerCoaster Tycoon*.

That's a problem, because while Sid was obviously after the intimacy of "model training," *Railroads!* is a strategy game, not a toy-train sim (the token "train table" mode's just solo play without the competition). It's as if Firaxis tried to mash the two together in an attempt at symmetry that benefits neither. That doesn't mean *Railroads!* isn't enjoyable (it is!). But...well, imagine track fine-tuning that's like forking individual noodles off a plate of spaghetti. How they saw past these jam-ups is baffling.

PARDON ME, BOY...

Scale issues aside, as a strategy game, *Railroads!* feels like a Sid Meier product should, meaning everything's a click away, and you're focused on connecting, buying, and selling without worrying about structure placement or resource busywork. You have one resource (cash) and you make it by linking industry supply to demand or completing supplementary minitasks—say, getting a certain amount of oil to a given city before your opponent does.

Laying track's a snap. Drag an endpoint over the terrain for an easy cost estimate: Uneven areas cost more, flat ones less. Once you're satisfied, click to build, plop down a depot (for cities) or annex (for industries), and you're set. Creating routes is just as easy: Click the route button, the origin point, what you want to transfer, and finally, where you want it to go...and presto, instant train-o! The challenge lies in keeping your track straight (i.e., fast), upgrading passenger and freight trains judiciously (the latest isn't always the best), and eventually snapping up all of your opponents' stock before they do it to you. It's delightfully nail-chewing in multiplayer, where you're trying to sneak business from your opponent's mainline cities.

In the end, it's hard not to fall a little bit in love with *Railroads!*, because it's just a lovable kind of game. Now if only Firaxis would release some scaled-up maps to match the game's ambitions.

Matt Peckham

VERDICT

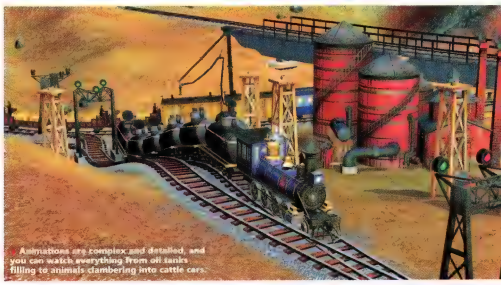
- **Terrific interface; easy on new players; tough enough for vets at higher difficulties.**
- **Claustrophobic maps; no quick-undo button; some graphical terrain glitches.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

IT'S LIKE PLAYING A BOARD GAME IN A SANDBOX WITH BUCKETS OF CHOO-CHOOING PARTS.



Animations are complex and detailed, and you can watch everything from oil tanks filling to animals clambering into cattle cars.

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

SID MEIER (I)

With the recent release of *Sid Meier's Railroads!*, we figure some readers might be interested in checking out a few classic games by legendary designer Sid Meier. Take a look at five of his best.

CIVILIZATION CHRONICLES

Behold the mother of all game compilations. *Civilization Chronicles* assembles 14 years' worth of *Civilization* lore—from the original 1991 *Civilization* to 2005's *Civilization IV*, along with every expansion in between—for a total of nine games. This boxed set also includes tech-tree posters for each game, a book on the history of the franchise, the tabletop *Civ* card game, and a special DVD featuring marketing material and Sid Meier interviews. It's a *Civ* fan's dream come true.

PIRATES!

Ahoy! This modern update to Sid Meier's classic *Pirates!* game puts you in command of a motley pirate crew as you search for booty, booty and more booty in 17th century Europe. It essentially amounts to a minigame collection: sword fighting, treasure hunting, ship-to-ship combat, daring prison escapes and tawdry dealings form the backbone of the game's open-ended action, loosely connected by a thin story in which your family betrays you and you're out of the frying pan and into the fire. It's easily one of the best and most addictive games in recent memory, and you'll be crying to put it up—something's here for everyone.

SIMMANIA 3

OK, so this compilation isn't strictly a Sid Meier production—but Meier's critically acclaimed *SimGolf* makes an appearance, along with five other sim games: *SimCopter*, *SimSafari*, *Sim Theme Park*, *SimCoaster*, and *SimCity 3000*. Longtime gamers will note that Maxis' Sim games are essentially ancestors of the various *<Insert Any Random Noun Here> Tycoon* titles that flood Walmart's shelves today—they're not exactly the most hardcore of games, but everything in this collection (and especially *SimGolf*) definitely justifies the $20 price tag.

CIVILIZATION IV: WARLORDS

For some bewildering reason, the team behind *Civilization IV: Warlords* saw fit to include Joseph Stalin as a Russian leader. Questionable as that choice may seem to some, it's one of *Warlords'* only letdowns. Most of the changes here come in the form of minor A.I. tweaks and additions (nothing new to *Civ* fanatics), but a handful of excellent scenarios provide the real meat of the game.

RAILROAD TYCOON

The game that ultimately led to the recent *Railroads!* also happens to be one of Sid Meier's earliest hits. For those of you wondering where to buy it, the answer is easy: You don't have to. *Railroads!* publisher 2K Games has graciously made the original *Railroad Tycoon* available for free on its website (www.2kgames.com), fully supported and playable in the DOSBox emulator. At that price, who can complain?

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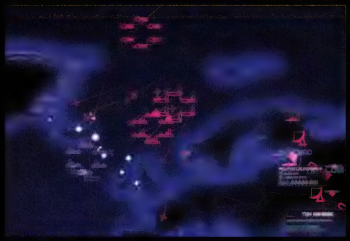
Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners

GAME TITLE	SCORE	ISSUE
Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs	9	1
Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales	4	1
Caesar IV	5	1
Company of Heroes	10	1
DEFCON	8	1
Faces of War	8	1
GTR 2	9	1
Joint Task Force	3	1
King's Quest III: To Heir Is Human	7	1
Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	1
Mage Knight: Apocalypse	5	1
Microsoft Flight Simulator X	6	1
NBA Live 07	4	1
NHL 07	5	1
ParaWorld	8	1
Sam & Max: Culture Shock	7	1
The Sierra Collections	4	1
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Dark Crusade	8	1

Extend

Where your games live on forever!



• The battle of the Greenland/Iceland/U.K. Gap.

• America defends freedom, again.

• Radar coverage is the key to DEFCON.

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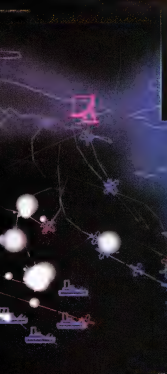
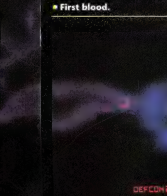


• The battle of the Pacific.

• First blood.



• Like the real Cold War, this one starts out with the Soviets testing U.S. airspace.

TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

DEFCON

Everybody dies—especially Bruce

Introversion Software | Introversion Software | GENRE Real-Time Strategy | Not Rated

5. 4. 3. 2. 1...

DEFCON *is made by Introversion, the developers of Darwinia. You can download a demo from www.everybody-dies.com. The full game is $17.50. It's also available on Steam.*

BRUCE: Even though Tom's heroes of the Soviet Union lost the most important battle of our time 15 years ago, I don't think Tom has ever gotten over it. So when he suggests we play Introversion's cool downloadable game *DEFCON* about a nuclear war just like in the movies, I knew I'd have to shoulder America's burden for the free world one last time. What I didn't realize was that the game had been designed by Communist sympathizers.

TOM: Look, you can't very well have a two-player nuclear war without one of us being the U.S. and the other being the U.S.S.R. I mean, come on—who wants to read about Africa lobbing nukes at China? That's about as sexy as Britain versus Argentina. So it's the U.S. versus the U.S.S.R. I'll be the bad guys, just like last month when I had to play as the Nazis in *Company of Heroes*.

BRUCE: The game starts with an appropriately ominous alert that it's "DEFCON 5." Well, boys, I reckon this is it. Nook-lee-uhr combat, toe-to-toe with the Rooskies!

TOM: Frankly, I don't mind being the Russkies, because *DEFCON* isn't a game about human rights or who can make the best sitcoms or jeans. This isn't the Cold War. This is the Hottest War. And as such, the Soviets have a few advantages. Firstly, we have Siberia on one side and Europe on the other. Russia loves her buffer zones. They'll keep Bruce's carriers and subs from getting too close with their nukes. The U.S.A., however, is flanked by oceans. If I play my cards right, I can practically dock at New York or Los Angeles to launch nukes.

Russia's other advantage is that no one wants to live in Siberia, so the bulk of her population is clustered on the west side of the country. This makes most of the U.S.S.R.'s people easier to defend with a few well-placed silos, which will shoot down incoming nukes in their default defensive state. I cluster four of my six silos in the Moscow and Leningrad area. I drop a fifth in the middle, around some cities called things like Omsk and Irkutsk, and a sixth near someplace called Khabarovsk way out in the east. I haven't heard of any of these places because there aren't any spy novels in which they figure in the title.

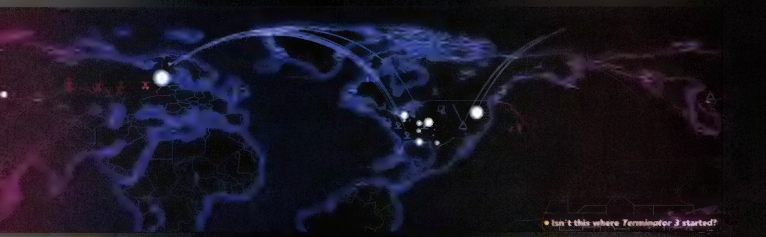
BRUCE: The first time we played this game, I put all my silos in Montana so Patrick Swayze would have an easier time defending them. Then I found out that, thanks to the great Ronald Reagan, my ICBM silos also fired anti-ICBM missiles. So for this game I'm putting two silos on the West Coast and three silos on the East Coast. A single silo defends the Midwest, but in Soho and Berkeley, nobody cares.

TOM: I divide my fleet in two, putting half in the Pacific and the other half in the Barents Sea. The half of my subs in the Pacific will circle south to hit the U.S. from over Mexico, while the half of my subs in the Atlantic will creep along the Arctic Ocean to hit the U.S. from the north, over Canada. I put two airbases near Leningrad to defend the Atlantic front, and two on the Siberian coast to cover my Pacific fleet. Radars go all around, including the mandatory station right up on the Bering Strait.

BRUCE: In the first version of this article, Tom spelled that "Being Straight." The fact that I'm picking on him for, of all things, spelling errors less than a third of the way into the article might give you a clue as to how this is going to end up.

TOM: In the first version of this article, Bruce inverted the order of the DEFCONs. That will be another clue as to how this is going to end up. DEFCON 5 proceeds uneventfully, as DEFCON 5s will. At DEFCON 4, our radars around the Bering ~~Straight~~ Strait light each other up. I'm sending >

I PUT ALL MY SILOS IN MONTANA SO PATRICK SWAYZE WOULD HAVE AN EASIER TIME DEFENDING THEM.



• Isn't this where *Terminator 3* started?

• This shows the population distribution in each country. Not exactly balanced, eh?

• Bruce's Seventh Fleet is firing blind.

bombers out from my Siberian airbases so they'll be in position to poke out that Alaskan radar installation in time for DEFCON 3, which is when conventional hostilities start.

BRUCE: Thanks to Tom's reliance on Soviet SIGINT and questionable ethics, I don't know how you "launch bombers so they'll be in position...in time for DEFCON 3." My game just tells me that I can't target Tom's radar now, because of the Helsinki Accords or Stockholm Syndrome or Los Angeles Cheating Disease. So while his planes home in on liberty's sentinels, SAC is grounded by cheap-shot lefty programming tricks. "Visual" Basic my ass.

TOM: Contact! I see an American battleship in the Pacific. Just in time for DEFCON 3, when weapons go hot. I redirect the bombers that were en route to his Alaskan radar installation. The carriers behind my battleship screen launch fighters and a few bombers. The battle for the Pacific begins, and I've got air cover from Siberia.

BRUCE: I put an airbase in Alaska specifically to support my Pacific fleet (U.S. Seventh Fleet for you grognards) because, for some reason, the Japanese have reneged on their defense commitment to the Pacific. But because this game is bugged, and Tom is cheating, and the designers live in Moscow and Beijing, I can't seem to get a lock on any of Tom's ships. I catch a glimpse of a Soviet "battleship" (note to Introversion: the Soviets never built anything larger than a battle cruiser) but the USS *New Jersey* and USS *Iowa* and the rest of my battlewagons are being slowly sunk by wave after wave of ship-launched missiles and Backfire bombers. What's weirder is that the Backfires look like the spaceship you controlled in *Asteroids*. How 1980s can you get?

TOM: That's the cool thing about *DEFCON*: It's so very '80s. The only way it could be more '80s is if it had music by Flock of Seagulls. While I'm humming a little Duran Duran, and maybe some Fixx, I bust through Bruce's battleship screen. Now my battleships are bearing down on his carriers, which are soon on their way to the bottom of the Pacific. And then we hit DEFCON 1. "Red skies at night...."

BRUCE: There was never any reason for me to attack Tom in the Pacific. My subs are well south of this area, so I was not screening them, and my ships have no missiles they can use against cities. I should have kept them off the California coast to protect the ungrateful hippies while my subs sneaked past the Philippines to strike at the people queued up in Tom's Siberian breadlines. But I'm a crusader for freedom, and I can't sit back when liberty calls. And so, despite my admirals' protests, the Seventh Fleet sails into eternity.

TOM: Meanwhile in the Atlantic: I see some of Bruce's battleships peeking through the GIUK gap into the Norwegian Sea, where I've been holding back, expecting their arrival. Normally, I think Russia is supposed to come charging out of the gap, but I have no desire to stray too far from my Leningrad airbases, which are now fully mobilized to support my navy over here. It should be a repeat of the Pacific battle. By the way, I mention the GIUK gap as a shout-out to all my old-school Harpoon homies. Arleigh Burke, bitches!

BRUCE: This is one of the big flaws in *DEFCON*. The Russians really have no need to engage in the Atlantic, because a sub on the U.S. Pacific coast can still nuke New York. An American sub defending freedom in the Atlantic, however, can only hit Leningrad. American subs need to almost get to the Kola Peninsula just to reach Moscow. So, unlike in the Pacific situation, I have no choice but to try and force my way into the Barents Sea. Unfortunately, this means that, once again, I'm fighting Tom's navy without land-based air cover. The NATO base at Keflavik? Nonexistent, thanks to Introversion's Marxist New World Order fantasy.

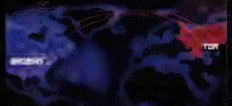
TOM: Now that I've knocked out Bruce's Alaskan radar, my ICBMs will be able to get closer before they're intercepted. With the Pacific secured, I've got carrier-based bombers on the way with nukes. Two are inbound for Seattle, four for San Francisco, and five for Los Angeles. I still haven't sussed out his defenses, so these might not make it to their targets.

BRUCE: I don't know how Tom can live with himself, queuing up nuke after nuke to strike cities that give sustenance to American treasures like Electronic Arts, BioWare, and Vivendi. But if Tom is having a crisis of conscience like the hero of Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun*, he isn't showing any signs of it yet.

TOM: I didn't see that movie, as I'm not a big Bruce Willis fan. Oh, and this just in: The first nuke has landed! Most of my bomber-launched missiles were shot down, but a single Russian missile impacted San Francisco and killed 4.7 million people. Sweet. Now I see Bruce's subs trying to squeeze through the IUK part of the GIUK gap. After some pitched fighting, I've got naval and air superiority over here. So I'm moving my carriers in to try to sink them before they can launch their missiles.

BRUCE: *Did I mention that this game was* designed by Red Communists?

TOM: As we're playing and I'm winning the naval battles, Bruce occasionally mutters things like, "They need to nerf the U.S.S.R," "The American player is at a serious disadvantage," and,



• The Hottest War.

• Hey, Baja! Duck!

• The U.S. Second Fleet fights without NATO help.

• Take that, Moscow!

• Bruce targets Tom's Siberian breadlines.

"Who made this game? A bunch of Communists?" So when I see silo launches light up all over America, I'm overjoyed; he's gotten exasperated and launched nukes out of impatience! Bruce has blinked first. Although the gesture more closely resembles a heavy sigh and a resigned shrug.

This is great news, because it means his silos won't be in defensive mode. My subs immediately launch their missiles from off the coast of Mexico, all my bombers are rerouted to targets around those silos, and any bombers on the ground or in carriers are immediately queued for launch. My silos hunker down in defensive mode to prepare for the onslaught of American ICBMs.

BRUCE: This pretty much sucks. Even sitting right off of Petropavlovsk, my Pacific subs can reach exactly two Russian cities with their missiles. And actually, only three of them can, because the fixed fleet formation means that the three subs in back can't hit anything. So after launching, my fleet heads for the Indian Ocean in the hopes that maybe we can get a better shot from there.

TOM: I know how Bruce feels. Stupid Canada. Their big fat empty swaths of land won't let half of my Arctic sub fleet into range of the U.S. Some of them launch nukes at Chicago and New York, but because of the way fleets are locked in formation, half of my subs are effectively useless here.

BRUCE: In reality, the Soviet boomer fleet was supposed to simply sit a short distance from its bases, since SLBMs have the range to hit pretty much anywhere. But in this Admiral Gorshkov fantasy of a game, Tom is launching from just off Baja.

TOM: Bruce might be right about the whole reality thing, but this is *DEFCON*, where I like to think my sub crews are going to enjoy some R&R in Baja after turning the West Coast into a plane of glass. Which is exactly what's happening as my sub-launched missiles slam into the West Coast. 5.1 million dead in Los Angeles. 7.1 million dead in San Francisco. 1.1 million dead in Seattle. It's going to be a hot summer out there.

BRUCE: Looks like *Half-Life 3* is going to be delayed.

TOM: Hmm, so Leningrad has taken a couple on the chin. Who cares? We'll just change the name again. The good news is that there are 11 million dead in New York. I also got direct hits on Houston and Dallas.

BRUCE: There goes Ensemble.

TOM: Bruce is pounding the hell out of Siberia, but I don't mind. Most of my population is just hanging out drinking vodka and reading Tolstoy under the defensive silos around Moscow. Since I don't need to defend my Siberian cities any more, and since I can't even remember their names, I launch ICBMs from a pair of silos out here.

BRUCE: For some reason, my missiles aren't getting through to the Russian heartland, even though we know from KGB archives that the most sophisticated defense systems the Soviets had guarding the Kremlin consisted of wooden catapults for firing potatoes at incoming minute-men. And half the time, they weren't loaded, since people kept stealing the potatoes. But the finest Raytheon technology can't seem to reach Omsk, Tomsk, Minsk, or Pinsk. Especially since Minsk isn't even on the map, being safe in Bielorussia on this oddly post-Soviet map.

TOM: Is one of my cities really named Tomsk? That's pretty cool. Bruce is saturating my defenses around Moscow. There are 22 million dead in Moscow, and Leningrad is gone. But I'm very much in the lead, thanks to having my defenses up longer while my bombers and subs did their thing. There's not a single U.S. city that hasn't taken a hit, whereas many of my cities are still untouched.

BRUCE: Gen. Thomas Power, once commander-in-chief of the Strategic Air Command, was purported to have said, "The whole idea is to kill the bastards.... Look. At the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian, we win!" To which his interlocutor was supposed to have said, "Well, in that case, you'd better hope they are a man and a woman." This is reflected in the game by the fact that each enemy civilian killed is worth two victory points, while each surviving friendly civilian is worth only one victory point.

TOM: We each began with 100 million citizens. There are 74.8 million Americans dead, but only 48.8 million Russians dead. This means my 51 million survivors will have the upper hand on his 24 million survivors when it comes to the mine-shaft gap. And in the immortal words of Vera Lynn: "We'll meet again." •

FINAL SCORE

TOM: 89 BRUCE: 11

Tom Chick

In addition to being one of the video-game industry's most prolific freelance critics, Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk

GFW contributor Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years. He loves war games like most people love oxygen.

UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

HALF-LIFE 2: IRIS

The return of the point-and-click adventure begins with the people!

PUBLISHER **National Academy of Digital, Interactive Entertainment** DEVELOPER **Team 1** GENRE **Adventure** AVAILABILITY **Download (www.filefront.com)** ESRB RATING **Not Rated** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS **1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 250MB hard drive space, *Half-Life 2*** MULTIPLAYER **None** VERSION REVIEWED **Proof-of-concept download**

MOD REVIEW

***Iris* all but** comes with a small pamphlet explaining why point-and-click adventuring should be a part of your life, and how *Iris* would happily come into your home and show you the way. Sadly, the *Half-Life 2*-mod-as-recruitment-routine wraps up all too quickly. Even still, with time travel, unique art, and a clever child/adult character mechanic, *Iris* offers hints of a once-great genre.

Be warned, though: The students who built it want to prove to their instructors that they've got enough to build a game around—not convince a publisher to continue funding. The art and storytelling style is charming, but numerous issues such as light shining through walls, a point-and-click interface that's incredibly unclear and frustrating, and the fetch-quest nature of the puzzles make it impossible to forget that this is just a student project.

A FOR EFFORT

Iris is the work-in-progress brainchild of a student group at the National Academy of Digital, Interactive Entertainment, and it reveals tons of potential...and nearly equal quantities of frustration. It places you in the role of a female protagonist named Iris in two different time periods—as a young girl and as a young woman—in "Chinatown." The gimmick: Pressing the J key "jumps" you between the two periods. In the past, you solve puzzles to alter the environment in the future. In the future, you can then finish your puzzles—in this case, finding the "forbidden newspaper" of a freer time.

The art style leans toward a smooth, cartoonish look that exaggerates each key aspect of a character perfectly. Picture *Team Fortress 2* in an alley-ridden block of a quiet, underdeveloped part of China where everyone speaks English with a thick "Asian" accent. The grey-clad murderous troops of the future Chinatown look ghastly, Iris as a child looks adorable, and the village itself looks appropriately idyllic—and later, ruinous.

MILITARY STATE

The story is mostly set in the year 2024, where Iris' home has fallen on hard times between her childhood and young adulthood. In the opening moments, we see soldiers with laser-sighted rifles march through the night's gloom, blow open the door to a local restaurant, and loudly murder the man working there. No one spares the event a glance, although that's partially because most of the folks nearby are busy vomiting, hiding, or clubbing.

Back in the past, soft daylight falls on the young Iris. The character is maybe 7 or 8 years old, carrying a backpack, and doing most of the actual problem-solving. By changing the situation in the past, Iris can create chances for herself in the future. Remove the radio from the (currently) charming restaurant, and Polaroid snapshots flash onto the screen of the brutal-looking soldiers walking past it in peace. Place the radio back, and snapshots play of the brutality you witnessed in 2024. Both settings add up to about half an hour—or an hour if you pace yourself. ■ **Patrick Joynt**

VERDICT

- ✚ **The base is there for a great adventure game.**
- ✖ **Terribly short; interface issues make point-and-click gameplay difficult.**

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

AFTERLIFE

COMPANY OF HEROES V1.3

www.companyofheroesgame.com

The latest patch for Relic's phenomenal military real-time strategy game introduces the new Seine River Docks multiplayer map and features improved game replay functionality, better performance on Nvidia videocards, and numerous bug- and gameplay-related fixes.

BATTLEFIELD 1942: EVE OF DESTRUCTION V0.51

www.eodmod.com

***Battlefield* junkies fed up with *2142*'s blunders should check out the latest version of *Eve of Destruction* for good ol' *BF1942*. This mod uses the Indochina/Vietnam conflict as its backdrop and provides dozens of new weapons, vehicles, and maps. A *Battlefield Vietnam* version is also available, with a *BF2* version in the works.**

THE STUDENTS WHO BUILT IT WANT TO PROVE TO THEIR INSTRUCTORS THAT THEY'VE GOT ENOUGH TO BUILD A GAME AROUND—NOT CONVINCE A PUBLISHER TO CONTINUE FUNDING.

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

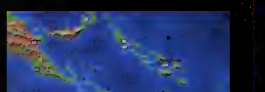
COLUMN

War gamers complain a lot. Since I'm a war gamer, this includes me. Just this past summer, I complained here about war-game developers' love affair with remakes instead of original designs. I'm willing to make an exception, though, for SSG's legendary *Carriers at War*, which has never been matched, either in terms of coverage of the subject (no, *Uncommon Valor* wasn't as good) or excellent A.I. (I don't think I ever won a single game against the computer). Roger Keating and Ian Trout's A.I. programming and design is justifiably known as the best in war-gaming, as evidenced by their work on the *Decisive Battles* series.

Now, Matrix Games has announced that SSG is working on a remake of *Carriers at War*, to be released by the end of the year. Given that its *Battlefront* remake was scheduled for Q3 2006, and we're now in Q4, you probably need to put some slack in that release date. Still, regardless of when it is released, I'll be thrilled to revisit one of my favorite games of all time. Sometimes, remakes are the right thing to do. And just between us, you didn't hear me complaining before, right?

Speaking of the upcoming *Battlefront* game, SSG has been posting some interesting designers' notes on its website, which discuss at length many of the things it's including in the game. The first four battles will be Saipan, Market Garden, Gazala, and Novorossiysk. The posts can be found at www.ssg.com.au. Yes, they are Australian.

If you're looking for a good game that's out now, Battlefront.com just released the *Eastern Front Expansion* to its excellent *Down in Flames* game. It costs $15 for just the expansion, or $35 for both bundled together.



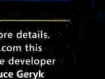
● **The remake of *Carriers at War*.**

See www.battlefront.com for more details.

Lastly, stop by grognards.1UP.com this month for my interview with the developer of *Advanced Squad Leader*. ● **Bruce Geryk**

Bruce Geryk

Bruce is all for remakes—as long as they're at least as good as the *Carriers at War* remake.



XTRAS

Open your web browser to gfw02.1UP.com or grognards.1UP.com to read Bruce's interview with the developer of computer-classic *Advanced Squad Leader*.

1UP NETWORK

FALLING PIECES

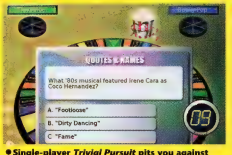
The best in casual gaming

COLUMN

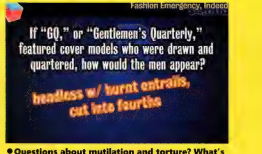
Any idiot can be smart. That's the beauty of trivia—it validates the useless crap filling your brain at the expense of things like math, history, geography, and basic toilet-training. By celebrating the very things that stunt your personal growth as actual knowledge, trivia competitions make you feel good about yourself.

The granddaddy of them all is *Trivial Pursuit*, and the *Silver Screen Edition* of this board-game classic is now available for just $20 at www.trivialpursuit.com. The nice thing about this game: You can tweak the rules for faster play—and it's a good thing, because the animations are excruciatingly and unnecessarily lengthy. Still, if you're up for a (very) moderate movie-trivia challenge, you could do worse.

Could you do better? Sure, but you'll have to buy an actual physical product called *You Don't Know Jack*, a gleefully snarky take on quiz shows.



● **Single-player *Trivial Pursuit* pits you against a demonically grinning bucket of popcorn.**


Fashion Emergency, Indeed!
If "GQ," or "Gentlemen's Quarterly," featured cover models who were drawn and quartered, how would the men appear?
headless w/ burnt entrails, cut into fourths

● **Questions about mutilation and torture? What's not to love about *You Don't Know Jack*?**

You can try out a tidy little 5.3MB demo on the web at www.jellyvision.com to get a feel for the game. The *Jack* developers also have a similar (but less funny) game called *Outsmart*, available for free online play at zone.msn.com. *Outsmart* pits you against "celebrities" like Kevin Sorbo and Triumph the Insult Comic Dog; the site hasn't been updated in awhile, but it's likely your only option to finally and definitively prove your intellectual superiority to *American Idol* cyborgs Carrie Underwood, Ruben Studdard, and that damned Clay Aiken.

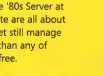
Finally, if you're hooked on VH1's *I Love the '80s*, then you should check out The '80s Server at www.80s.com. The games on this site are all about *Top Gun* and Michael J. Fox...and yet still manage to present a stiffer trivia challenge than any of these other games. And they're all free.

● **Robert Coffey**

> FINALLY AND DEFINITIVELY PROVE YOUR INTELLECTUAL SUPERIORITY TO *AMERICAN IDOL* CYBORGS CARRIE UNDERWOOD AND RUBEN STUDDARD.

Robert Coffey

Robert's still eagerly awaiting *Trivial Pursuit: Serial Killer Edition*.



CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

This month: The original *EverQuest*

COLUMN

Can you go home again? If you're me and it's real life, you can't because your mom has changed addresses and taken a new name just to get away from you. In the world of *EverQuest*, however, the answer is a little more complicated.

Ahhh, *EverQuest*. Just thinking about the hundreds of hours I put into that game back in the day brings back happy memories as well as an uncomfortable feeling of existential dread, as I contemplate what else I might have done with all that time. (Like, for example, play other games.) As was the case with many gamers, *EverQuest* was my gateway drug into the MMO scene. I tried *Ultima Online* the day it launched in 1997, but when my character was killed by a goat, well, that was it for me.

EverQuest, however, was unavoidable—and, in its day, amazing. Released on March 16, 1999, the game went from relative obscurity to sleeper hit to genuine pop-culture phenomenon in the span of a year, as more and more people—including me—discovered the sheer addictive joy of adventuring with other gamers online. "*EverCrack*," it was called, and as the in-game society evolved with its own lingo and behavior, the outside world also reacted, with panicked news reports of *EQ* addicts abandoning their real-world responsibilities for the game. And while *EQ*'s hundreds of thousands of users may seem quaint next to *WOW*'s multimillions, it was huge at the time. *WOW* may have its own *South Park* episode, but on the week of Dec 9, 2000, *EverQuest* landed on the cover of *TV Guide*, an arguably more impressive milestone of mainstream acceptance.

● **Hi. I'm a monster. I've been sitting in this dungeon for seven years, waiting for you to kill me.**

SOMEWHERE ON A MOUNTAINTOP, DOARKUS STILL WAITS FOR ME.

But, you know, yesterday's *Lost* is today's *Heroes*. Fans get bored, move on, find other loves and addictions. In my case, personally, it had been a love/hate relationship all along. I was addicted to *EverQuest* like almost no other game—and yet, it drove me up the wall. The endless downtime, the XP loss on death, the interface. It was a hard and often unfriendly game, but I put up with it because of the experience it offered—until the much friendlier *World of WarCraft* came along.

So a funny thing happened when *The Serpent's Spine*, the 12th and most recent expansion for *EverQuest*, landed on my desk here at *GFW*: I wanted to play it. Actually, first, I have to say that I honestly was so far out of the loop that I was shocked that new expansions were still coming out. I mean, I knew the game was still live, but I had no idea how alive it was. Sony Online still has 40 people on the development team for the first *EQ*, and is claiming 300,000 current players. The message boards are as strong as ever, and when I posted to ask folks why they're still playing the game, I got barraged with long love letters to a game many of us had considered "over."

"I've been playing for seven years, I'm max level, and there's still a ton of things I can do to improve my character," wrote Greg Waterhouse, echoing what many fans wrote me. "The combination of the environment, the challenge, and the other people who play are the reasons why I love this game and why I plan to keep playing for a long time to come."

LOOKING FOR SOW

So the hook was in: I had to play again. Thanks to the bargain-priced *EverQuest Titanium* edition, I was able to reinstall the base game plus the first 10 expansions in one shot. Somewhere on a mountaintop, lonely and frozen, my old Dwarf Paladin Doarkus still waits for me (unless Sony deleted him), but what I was most interested in was starting over fresh. What did the *EQ* newbie experience feel like in 2006?

The answer is that, at least compared to the old *EQ*, it's a lot friendlier. Gone are the days where you were just plopped into the world and made to fend for yourself with no quests or map. Now, there's a self-contained newbie zone complete with actual quests to solve. The interface is the frighteningly similar low-rent affair it's always been—and yet some attempt has been made to "modernize" it and make it friendlier. A "find" command, for instance, places a cool in-game trail straight to any NPC you're looking for—a feature that might have saved me 40 hours or so back in the old days.

● **It's not the prettiest MMO on the block anymore, but if you're willing to get past its looks, the charms are still there for lapsed players.**

But I'm not going to sugarcoat things here. It is what it is: A game that's now 7 years old. The graphics, by modern standards, are—to be nice—primitive. The downtime still sucks. When my new character, Mohran, a Drakkin Warrior, took his first XP loss after dying at level 7, I got mad like it was 1999 again. I can't imagine a new player, used to the conveniences of *WOW*, being able to put up with *EQ* or even understand why it was ever so big.

And yet...there it sits, still on my hard drive, with this article now done. I hear the music in my head. The *EQ* atlas is open on my desk. I think about the 400 zones in the game, and the fact that Mohran's only seen two. Surely I couldn't be getting sucked back into this old game again. Or could I? ●

Jeff Green

GFW's editor-in-chief is so glad he doesn't waste his life as a Dwarf Paladin in *EQ* anymore. Now he's a Gnome Warlock in *WOW*!

GAME VIDEOS
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Video cheats and walkthroughs
Never be stuck again. Video cheats and walkthroughs show you exactly how to play the games to win.
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Including retro game ads, the funniest game-related videos on the Web, user-submitted movies, 'extreme' gameplay movies and more.
1UP NETWORK

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The latest and greatest demos and patches

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine **and FileFront.com have joined forces to bring you both the best possible PC-gaming coverage and access to the hottest game downloads—demos, mods, patches, and more. Head to GFW.FileFront.com to try these yourself.**

SID MEIER'S RAILROADS! (DEMO)

Check out a sampling of the goods, resources, industries, and objectives in this train simulation from the creator of *Civilization*.

NEED FOR SPEED CARBON (DEMO)

Prove your worth in circuit racing and drifting before tackling the ultimate canyon duel in this demo of the latest game in the *Need for Speed* series.

PERIMETER: EMPEROR'S TESTAMENT (DEMO)

Explore the single- and multiplayer aspects of this sci-fi RTS. This demo gives you access to the entire game for three hours of uninterrupted, unrestricted fun.

ANNO 1701 (DEMO)

Sample the next installment in Sunflowers' real-time strategy game. This demo features a tutorial, one single-player map, and one multiplayer map.

STARSIEGE: 2845 ALPHA (DEMO)

Mix *MechWarrior* with the fast-paced action of *Tribes* and you will find why this game is ready to challenge you. Give the demo a whirl and see.

ALARM FÜR COBRA 11: NITRO (DEMO)

Sample two of the tracks from the 15 different missions of the full game, set on six authentic stretches of motorway.

MADE MAN (DEMO)

See what it takes to live the life of a Mafioso in this third-person action demo featuring an intro cut-scene and one level from the game.

BATTLEFIELD 2142 V1.01 (PATCH)

What can we say about this patch? It addresses a client-side crash issue in Titan mode, that's what!

PUTT MANIA (SHAREWARE)

Take this arcade-style miniature golf game for a spin. It features 90 custom-built holes and an in-game editor to build your own.

PARAWORLD V1.01 (PATCH)

This patch fixes a number of minor bugs that plagued the initial release of the game.

F.E.A.R. V1.08 (PATCH)

This update adds a number of minor improvements, including the ability to reuse Proximity Mines and Remote Detonators you threw in a hasty moment of panic.

JETJUMPER (SHAREWARE)

The name sums it up: Pilot a jumping rocket through a variety of trial levels, but beware: One wrong move and it's game over, man.

BLAST MINER (SHAREWARE)

Get down and dirty with TNT and gasoline to create huge explosions that blast through the earth. Did we mention there are explosions?

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WINDOWS VISTA:
SIMPLY GREAT GAMING

Microsoft's new OS breathes new life into PC gaming

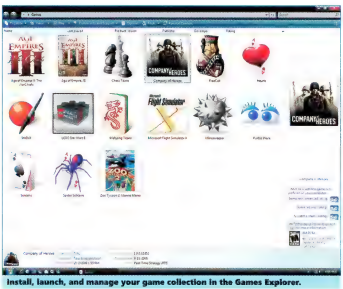
In one month's time, Microsoft will undertake its biggest product launch in years, ringing in the New Year with a new operating system, Windows Vista.

Simply put, Windows Vista is the most consumer-friendly operating system Microsoft has ever released. Windows Vista is full of entertainment features such as Media Center, Windows Media Player 11, improved movie and memories capabilities, and, of course, numerous gaming-friendly features. From the moment gamers load Windows Vista, they will find a brand-new space dedicated to gaming, the Games Explorer, which is an easy way to create a safer gaming environment with parental controls, and an unparalleled graphic experience with DirectX 10.

Let's take a quick look at Windows Vista's gaming-friendly features:

in Windows Vista, your games are front and center in the Start menu.

The Games Explorer: In the past, music, photos, and even TV and movies have had dedicated spaces to call their own in Windows. Now, in Windows Vista, games are front and center, right on the Start menu. The Games Explorer is the single location on the PC to manage your gaming experience. Players can easily install, organize, launch, and remove all of their games on their PCs. Plus, games displayed in the Games Explorer will include game-related information, including publisher, developer, website addresses, and game ratings, as well as any parental controls that have been established by the Administrator. >



Install, launch, and manage your game collection in the Games Explorer.

Games for Windows

THE OFFICIAL WORD

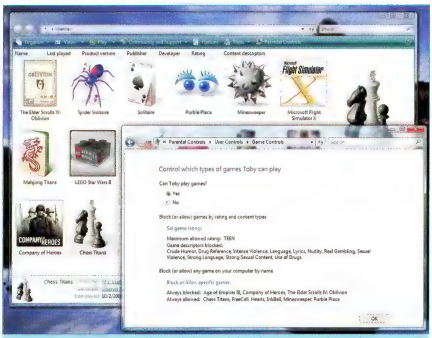
Parental Controls: One of the most compelling advancements in Windows Vista is the rich set of parental controls built right into the operating system. Microsoft has designed a very simple-to-use interface for parents to create a gaming environment suitable for their children. Game access can be restricted or allowed based on:

1) Game title
2) Game rating (integrating ratings from six different international ratings-board standards)
3) Game content descriptors
4) Time restrictions—by day and time

Parents also can review activity on the PC through weekly activity reports, to help give them peace of mind and confidence.

DirectX 10: What all serious players can get really excited about are the DirectX 10 graphic advancements built into Windows Vista. With the correct GPU, users playing DirectX 10–based games will experience a significant upgrade in gameplay. Stunning use of shadow and light, blurring, realistic 3D, and fully destructible environments are just a few of the huge improvements that will make Windows Vista gaming an unparalleled experience. For more on DirectX 10, see "DirectX 10" on pg. 114.

Of course, game technology and hardware doesn't mean much without great games. And with the advent of DirectX 10, there will be a slew of new titles (and patches for current titles) that will take advantage of this cutting-edge technology. Games like *Crysis* (EA Partners), *Company of Heroes* (THQ), *Hellgate: London* (Namco Bandai), and


Name
Last played
Product version
Publisher
Developer
Rating
Content descriptors
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
Spider Solitaire
Solitaire
Purble Place
Minesweeper
Microsoft Flight Simulator X
Mahjong Titans
LEGO Star Wars II
Company of Heroes
Chess Titans
Parental Controls ▸ User Controls ▸ Game Controls
Control which types of games Toby can play
Can Toby play games?
Yes
No
Block (or allow) games by rating and content types
Set game ratings
Maximum allowed rating: TEEN
Game descriptors blocked:
Crude Humor, Drug Reference, Intense Violence, Language, Lyrics, Nudity, Real Gambling, Sexual Violence, Strong Language, Strong Sexual Content, Use of Drugs
Block (or allow) any game on your computer by name
Block or Allow specific games
Always blocked: Age of Empires III, Company of Heroes, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
Always allowed: Chess Titans, FreeCell, Hearts, InkBall, Minesweeper, Purble Place
OK
Create a PC-gaming environment that's safe for your kids with Vista's parental controls.

Restrict or allow access to games based on ESRB ratings, time, and many other factors.

Flight Simulator X (Microsoft Game Studios) all will support DirectX 10. You'll be able to play these great games on Windows XP with DirectX 9, but if you want *the best experience*, you'll want to play them on Windows Vista with DirectX 10.

You will continue to see fresh new titles from the biggest publishers bearing the Games for Window banner. That banner means the game takes advantage of many Windows Vista features and is simple, safer, and fun. For example, these games will install directly into the Games Explorer, launch from the Media Center interface, support multiple screen aspects, and work with the full range of Xbox accessories, including the Xbox 360 Wireless Controller, Headset, and Racing Wheel.

But it doesn't stop there. Microsoft is also bringing the power and community of Xbox Live to Windows Vista with the release of *Shadowrun* and *Halo 2 for Windows Vista*, both from Microsoft Game Studios. Finally Windows gamers will be able to experience the rich features and easy multiplayer features of Xbox Live right on their Windows Vista–based PCs. And, incredibly, *Shadowrun* players will be able to play against their Xbox 360 friends, the first chapter in settling the Windows-Xbox 360 debate. (Note that Xbox Live subscribers will need an Xbox Live Gold Subscription to do this.)

Finally, when Windows Vista releases, you'll notice four different versions of the operating system: Windows Vista Home Basic, Windows Vista Home Premium, Windows Vista Business, and Windows Vista Ultimate. Which version makes sense for you? Since most gamers often enjoy other types of multimedia entertainment, including TV, movies, music, and photography, you should consider Windows Vista Home Premium. If you are an intense player and multimedia enthusiast, Windows Vista Ultimate may be the better choice since it includes all of the features of the other versions of Windows Vista plus a few added features.

Whichever version you choose, rest assured you'll have the best PC-gaming experience on Windows Vista. But don't take our word for it. The press and gaming community have been looking at Windows Vista for the past few months, and here are a few of their thoughts:

New York Times: The PC Embraces Its Gaming Abilities
Seth Schiesel, July 18, 2006

- "In fact, the world's most popular game machine is the personal computer. And that doesn't mean Macintoshes. ...That means PCs based on Microsoft's Windows operating system."
- "...Microsoft is beginning to embrace gaming as a core part of using a computer. That means marketing the PC as the world's most powerful gaming system and revamping Windows to make it more game-friendly."
- "So there will certainly be some new buzz around computer games this holiday season. But that will hardly compare with what the general public should expect to hear about PC gaming from Microsoft early next year as the company trots out its next version of Windows, called Vista."

ExtremeTech: Microsoft Pushes Game Development Forward at Gamefest
Jason Cross, August 17, 2006

- "The push to treat Vista like a games platform on par with the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, or other premium modern consoles is a pretty big deal. Microsoft projects that they will sell 80 to 120 million copies of Vista in the first year alone, and with Vista's more robust hardware requirements (especially in the graphics arena), they should all be pretty capable game-playing machines. That's an absolutely enormous market, and has the potential to eventually make the PC the largest single platform for game sales."

GameSpot: A Look at Windows Vista Installed Games
James Yu, July 24, 2006

- "Microsoft is working with casual-game developers to help them produce high-quality games that users will expect to see on the Vista platform."

Forbes: The Vista Domino Effect on Tech
Peter Topolewski, August 18, 2006

- "Speaking of multimedia functionality, Vista is expected to give gamemakers a boost. The operating system is going to mark a major step forward in cross-platform gaming capabilities, and while not really on the radar for many investors in gamemakers, Vista—once it hits the market—is going to provide a pleasant tailwind for companies like Electronic Arts."

DigitalTrends: Windows Vista: Game On
Scott Steinberg, August 31, 2006

- "No matter if you can't tell *Company of Heroes* or *Crysis* from a cantaloupe. The OS still boasts numerous sweeping improvements guaranteed to generate excitement in virtual circles. And yes, that goes for both casual and diehard enthusiasts."
- "Taken together, you're looking at an operating system that pumps up the audiovisual capabilities, gives users additional feedback on/greater control over their leisure experiences, and makes gaming more accessible than ever."

CVG: What Does Vista Mean for You?
Staff, September 25, 2006

- "With leading developers excited by and supporting this new operating system, and with an aggressive in-store marketing and sales campaign projecting the PC as a serious competitor to Xbox 360 and PS3, it's starting to look like the PC could be about to realize its potential as the most powerful and exciting gaming platform of them all."

DIRECTX 10

Visuals on Windows Vista like you've never seen before

Last month, we told you about the amazing power of DirectX 10 graphics hardware and what it will mean for gaming on Windows Vista. This month, we'd like to give you some insight into the remarkable software that is powering this hardware—DirectX 10.

Windows Vista gamers will be the first to experience the next revolution in immersive and interactive graphics beyond anything currently available in the current- or next-gen console space. This is made possible by DirectX 10, Microsoft's new graphics platform available only in Windows Vista.

By using DirectX 10, game developers can drive upcoming DirectX 10 graphics hardware with maximum performance, leveraging the breadth of new hardware capabilities to deliver spectacular visual experiences.

The DirectX 10 architecture has been almost a half-decade in the making: During this period, Microsoft's graphics architects worked in close collaboration with top-tier game developers and hardware manufacturers to build the most powerful graphics platform to date, with a focus on matching the power of the tomorrow's games and graphics hardware. DirectX 10 leaps forward, providing a series of new features and blowing away old limitations to enable developers to realize their creativity without being bogged down by hardware constraints or differences.

Unlike in past versions of DirectX, where many hardware features were optional, in DirectX 10 all hardware features and functionality are required ("no caps" in game-developer-speak). This means every DX10 card provides the same feature baseline, which ensures DirectX 10 games "just work" on DirectX 10 hardware.

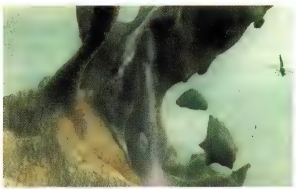
Most notably, DirectX 10 will deliver more richly detailed visuals: more visual diversity, more complexity, more vegetation, more detailed characters, more materials, more unique objects, and larger textures. Simply put, you get more with DirectX 10: more power, more realism, and more immersive, lifelike environments. Take a look at the top example on the right: Generating a scene like this in DirectX 9 could take hundreds or even thousands of "commands," taking precious processing power away from other game systems like A.I., gameplay, or physics. With DirectX 10, the power of the hardware and the flexibility of DirectX 10 mean it can all happen completely on the graphics card, leaving the CPU to concentrate on other elements of the game.

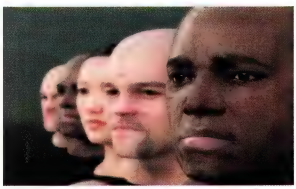
DirectX 10 isn't only about displaying more content. For the first time, DirectX 10 allows generation of new content dynamically. Features like the new DirectX 10 geometry shader and stream output allow developers to "amplify" and "recirculate" geometry on the fly. The result is a constant stream of new and unique content—new characters, new worlds, new environments. For example, in the center shot, developed by Nvidia, 3D terrain and waterfalls are "grown" dynamically on the graphics card—something not feasible without advancements provided by DirectX 10 software and hardware.

By raising the bar of programmability and flexibility in DirectX 10, we can scale the hardware to approach the imagination of game designers and artists. The result? More sophisticated material shading, complex lighting calculations, and film-inspired environmental and post-processing effects. The bottom example illustrates character headshots in Crytek and EA Partners' upcoming title, *Crysis*.

In order to play games designed to take advantage of DirectX 10 features and performance, you'll need Windows Vista and a DirectX 10–capable graphics processor. Currently available hardware includes the Nvidia 88xx, but more is on the way from the other graphics hardware manufacturers. Of course, any DirectX 10–capable video card will also support playing older DirectX 9 games.

Microsoft Windows continues to be the innovation engine for graphics and gaming, and DirectX 10 in Windows Vista is no exception. For Windows gamers, DirectX 10 will ensure that you will continue to be blown away by the most cutting-edge visual experience out there, only available in games for Windows.





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Tech

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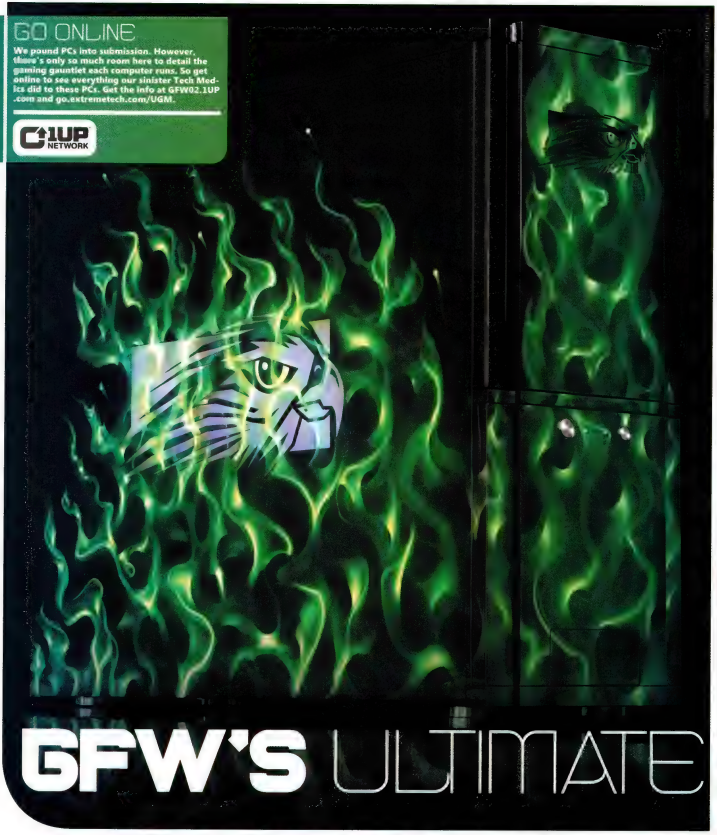
We pound PCs into submission. However, there's only so much room here to detail the gaming gauntlet each computer runs. So get online to see everything our sinister Tech Medics did to these PCs. Get the info at GFW02.1UP.com and go.extremetech.com/UGM.

1UP NETWORK



GFW'S ULTIMATE

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HARDWARE WARS

We editors are a secret cabal of the most jaded tech-heads on the planet. Buried inside EMP-proof bunkers with bleeding-edge gear, we won't bat an eye at most dual-graphics-card setups or quad-core CPUs. We demand the best—a one-of-a-kind machine that'd make children run screaming and grown men cry. So, a challenge was sent out across the land:

"Build us your ultimate gaming machine. Prices be damned—pack as much as humanly possible into a single, colossal computer. The winner will walk away with the honor of knowing that they have indeed created the most powerful gaming PC on the planet."

Only nine vendors were brave enough to answer the call. Upon entry, each agreed to the following rules:

1. Any computer entered in the contest will be available for purchase by November 15, 2007 (barring chip/board delays) at the given price or less.

2. Said computer remains fully supported under the company warranty—especially if overclocked by the vendor.

ExtremeTech's Loyd Case and Jason Cross worked in conjunction with *GFW*'s Darren Gladstone to create the most demanding series of tests and benchmarks in the business. Everything from real games in real-world settings to synthetic benchmarking programs helped with scoring, but we ultimately relied on three criteria in determining a winner: performance, stability, and quality. In the case of a negligible tie, case design factored into selecting the champion. A special honor also went to the best overall value.

The most exciting part of this competition is that many entrants submitted rigs with new DirectX 10 Nvidia boards. That's right: We're the first hardware reviewers on the planet to get a true taste of things to come. Who is the winner? Which machines didn't even make it to the finish line? Who are the almost-rans? On to the tale of the tape! **Loyd Case, Jason Cross, and Darren Gladstone**

> THE WINNER WALKS AWAY WITH THE HONOR OF KNOWING THAT THEY HAVE CREATED THE BEST-POSSIBLE PC.

WHAT "THEY" SAY ABOUT UGM

"Forget all the awards and editors' choices in other magazines—the honor of being *GFW*'s Ultimate Gaming Machine is like winning the World Series." These aren't our words; the CEO of a major gaming-PC manufacturer said this about our "little" contest. This wasn't brownnosing. We hope.

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a product is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any hardware receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worthwhile—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

9-10: Excellent
Bleeding edge tech that is virtually bulletproof. A must-have.

7-8.5: Good
This is a solid performer saddled with some minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average
Eh, it's all right. It'll do the job, but it might not be your best bet.

3-4.5: Bad
Caveat emptor, friend. Serious shortcomings may vary your hardware mileage.

0-2.5: Terrible
Someone needs to get punched for selling this junk.

Editors' Choice award
Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a *GFW* Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

YOU BE A JUDGE!

Reviewing top-gear rigs is no easy task. It's even tougher to police that all will follow the rules after we declare a winner in the magazine. That's why we're deputizing you, the readers, as honorary judges. If there's any funny business—be it machine availability or full warranty support—e-mail us (techmedics@ziffdavis.com). If anyone in the competition doesn't adhere to the letter of the law, we'll call them on it and select a new winner if necessary.

GAMING MACHINE

The search for Earth's most powerful PC*

*Until newer hardware comes along next week, that is

MUSCLE MACHINE

MANUFACTURER: **Alienware** PRODUCT: **Area-51 ALX** PRICE: **$6,950** URL: **www.alienware.com**

Is this a PC or a '57 Chevy? Good question.

ALIENWARE'S AREA-51 ALX IS ONE OF THE BEST ALL-AROUND PERFORMERS IN THIS GROUP OF BLAZING-FAST RIGS.

Review

One of the key selling points of Alienware's new Area-51 ALX systems is the Alien FX lighting system. The colored glowing lights that emanate from the alien-head logo in front and shine out through those big-1950s-car-style chrome fins are user-adjustable, so your system can glow differently than anyone else's—if only it worked on our system. We got no lights at all, and Windows delivered a message that read: "There was an error while the Alien FX controller was communicating with the computer." Our test system whirred along alone in the dark, unable to alter the glowing color in each of its five lighted zones. At least Alienware's new case isn't quite as huge as those of some of the company's competitors.

Beyond that, the system was perfectly stable, reliable, and *fast*—damn fast. The custom liquid cooling lets Alienware crank up the clock speed on the Core 2 Extreme dual-core CPU to 3.64GHz. Coupled with a pair of GeForce 8800 GTX graphics cards (also liquid-cooled), the system is one of the best all-around performers in a roundup full of amazingly fast PCs. In fact, for some reason we can't quite explain, this box delivered significantly faster results in our *Half-Life 2: Lost Coast* benchmark than any other Ultimate Game Machine contestant. A kilowatt power supply keeps everything fed with enough juice to make it perfectly stable; outside of that odd Alien FX problem, we didn't experience any crashes, corruptions, or slowdowns.

A pair of 150GB 10,000-rpm hard drives in a RAID 0 array, together with a 500GB 7,200-rpm data drive, deliver fantastic drive performance. Tweakers will be glad to know that the BIOS exposes the full wealth of overclocking and voltage-tweaking options available on these nice new nForce 680i motherboards.

Like many of these systems that opt for ultimate performance, the ALX is quite loud, so don't expect to get much sleep with it running in the same room. The internal cabling is fairly neat, but the snaking tubes for liquid cooling together with the wires required for the Alien FX lighting system make for a little more wiring jumble than we like to see.

Ultimately, you either like Alienware's latest case designs or you don't—but either way, you're stuck with them. The Alien FX is a good visual customization option (had it worked), but we find the aesthetics of some other high-end boxes more appealing. There can be no denying the performance of Alienware's new top-of-the-line ALX system, but we'd love to see something with a little more sex appeal—inside and out.

VERDICT

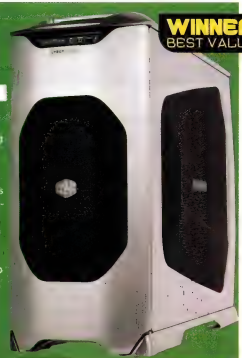
- **One of the fastest systems in a field of amazingly fast systems. Very stable.**
- **Pretty noisy. We'd like to see a more attractive case and neater cabling inside.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

THE AFFORDABLE ALTERNATIVE



WINNER: BEST VALUE!

MANUFACTURER: **CyberPower** PRODUCT: **Gamer Infinity SLI KO** PRICE: **$3,999** URL: **www.cyberpowerpc.com**

REVIEW

You have to hand it to CyberPower: Shipping an overclocked Core 2 Duo system with a pair of GeForce 8800 GTX cards at a buck under $4,000 is no mean feat. That's right—for a bargain-basement price (well, that's all relative in this competition), you can get some kick-ass performance.

The Gamer Infinity SLI KO comes from off-the-shelf, vanilla parts. None of that fancy-pants, high-end boutique stuff here. No slick, painted chassis, unique industrial design, or CPU overclocked to stellar-case temperatures. What you will find is a well-behaved, competent system that performs well, runs stably, and offers few amenities.

CyberPower builds its liquid-cooled monster inside a standard CoolerMaster CM Stacker 830 Evolution aluminum case. This massive case houses a sealed CoolerMaster Aquagate liquid-cooling system that keeps the Core 2 Extreme X6800 system icy while running at 3.40GHz.

While performance wasn't quite up to the superoverclocked VoodooPC system, it's still pretty darn impressive. The pair of GeForce 8800 GTX cards kept the benchmarks humming along with nary a stutter. The Gamer Infinity held up like a champ and ran through all our tests without an issue.

One item the Gamer Infinity lacks—and this is a bit of a head-scratcher—is a dedicated sound-card. CyberPower opted instead to use the motherboard's integrated HD audio. Sure, integrated audio has come a long way, but using it means two things for this system: First, since we can't truly calculate the CPU load that audio demands, it could cause a slight performance hiccup. Second, you'll have to give up some of the more refined and immersive 3D positional audio capabilities of the Sound Blaster X-Fi cards used in the rest of the systems in this roundup. Really, if you're buying a "money is no object" machine, you expect to at least see a soundcard in there.

If your budget won't allow you to buy into the rarefied altitudes represented by Falcon Northwest, Alienware, or VoodooPC, then CyberPower looks like a good option. With the money you're saving, kick an extra hundred or so into a good dedicated soundcard.

VERDICT

+ Lowest-cost GeForce 8800 SLI system tested; great price/performance.

– Not quite as fast as the bleeding edge; lacks dedicated soundcard.

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

SEEING GREEN

MANUFACTURER: **Falcon Northwest** PRODUCT: **Mach V** PRICE: **$7,995** URL: **www.falcon-nw.com**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE for Windows

Eight grand for an über-gaming PC? You better believe it, buddy. There's at least $1,000 worth of custom paint on the case alone. The green air-brushed flames adorning this Falcon Northwest system are an example of Falcon's Exotix custom paint service. Basically, Falcon can put anything on your case that can be put on a car—any color and style of paint, any logo or design.

Inside, the box is a work of art and rigid, tied-together cabling. The interior seems spacious, with only a couple of small tubes heading to the CPU to cool it with a sealed Sanyo Denki watercooling system (no refills necessary). Some of the cables are a bit more visible than we consider ideal, but everything is very neatly folded and bound to avoid getting in the way of the internal connections—or your twiddling fingers. Speaking of twiddling, the nForce 680i motherboard has all its overclocking, voltage-adjusting, and tuning options fully exposed.

Not that we suspect you'll want to fiddle with the razor's-edge performance the folks at Falcon managed to squeeze out of this box. The quad-core Core 2 QX6700 processor has been bumped up to 3.51GHz, and it runs as solid as a rock. We didn't see a single crash, error message, or warning in all our testing. The pair of GeForce 8800 GTX cards, though not overclocked, delivers amazing graphics performance even at our most absurd ultra-high-res test settings. Opting for a quad-core instead of dual-core processor makes the system slightly faster at a couple of game tests and slightly slower at others, but we're taking about "slightly slower/faster than world-class" here. Make no mistake—this Mach V breaks the sound barrier. Equally impressive is that it isn't particularly noisy when idling—only when it spins up under heavy load does it approach the volume of many other UGM contestants.

It's all top-shelf gear, but you don't buy a system like this just for the gear. You buy it for the amazing custom case and matching keyboard/mouse (which share the case's striking green paint job), for the obvious care and attention to detail in the system's construction. And Falcon Northwest treats you like you just spent three months' pay on a high-end gaming PC, right down to the "thanks for buying a Falcon" note in the box.

So why not a perfect 10? The little front flap covering the USB and audio ports at the bottom of the case are chintzy, and some of the internal cables could've been hidden better—small stuff, we know. But that makes it fall just short of perfection.

VERDICT

+ Expert craftsmanship inside and out, coupled with a fantastic custom paint job.

+ Even for a price-is-no-object PC, that's a lot of money.

9/10

EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

TOWER OF POWER

MANUFACTURER: **VoodooPC** PRODUCT: **Omen Intel Core 2 Duo** PRICE: **$5,700** URL: **www.voodoopc.com**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE

VoodooPC's custom Omen case is far from ordinary. Sure, the anodized aluminum is available in 22 different colors (we like the "Talladega Black" that was shipped to us), but it's more than that. This isn't just a slightly tweaked and repurposed standard OEM case. From the big rubber feet, custom machine-cut logos, bottom-mounted power supply, and tool-less drive bays, it's obvious to any computer enthusiast that this is something different. It's sleek, stylish, and eye-catching—and though it glows bright white inside and the Voodoo logos glow red, it never seems gaudy.

Inside, this is one of the most elegant machines we've ever seen. The plastic tubing that runs from the way-overclocked (3.8GHz!) Core 2 Extreme X6800 processor and motherboard north bridge chip to the liquid cooler in the front gives it a bit of a mad scientist sci-fi look. The cabling is exquisite—sturdy power prongs poke out from the back of the system here and there to plug into the two GeForce 8800 GTX graphics cards or motherboard power connector, but, other than that, you simply don't see cables at all.

It's all relatively quiet, too. "Relatively" is the key word, there—it's far too noisy to leave whirring in your living room or overnight in your bedroom, but the noise level is quite reasonable for such a high-power, overclocked PC. Interestingly, the sounds are split between the whoosh of whirring fans and a soft gurgle emanating from the liquid cooling tank (don't worry, you shouldn't ever need to refill it).

In addition to achieving one of the highest overclocking speeds we've seen in a shipping system, Voodoo opted to include three 10,000 rpm hard drives all together in a single RAID 0 array. While this achieves the fastest drive speed of all the Ultimate Game Machine systems, we would caution potential buyers to make sure they back up often—if one drive goes down, you're hosed. Our stability testing went very well indeed, with no errors, hang-ups, or shutdowns in all our benchmarking. We even tried to kill it by looping 3DMark06 for hours, and it kept on truckin'. Voodoo's impressive engineering efforts produced the fastest overall system in the lineup—albeit by the smallest of margins.

As with the system from Falcon Northwest, the out-of-box experience with VoodooPC is something special. Espresso chocolate, temporary tattoos, a Voodoo T-shirt, and a folder of documentation that is a work of art unto itself—all this stuff may not be a big deal next to the hardware in the PC you just bought, but it makes you feel like a special customer. Though this system doesn't have the impressive custom paint job the Falcon system does, it's around $2,000 less expensive, and it certainly doesn't suffer from lack of sex appeal. No system is perfect, but this one is about as close as you'll ever get.

VERDICT

- **Fastest of the fastest. Beautiful craftsmanship. Fantastic out-of-box experience.**
- **Umm...we need a minus? You can't easily turn off the inside white light.**

10 10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

NO SYSTEM IS TRULY PERFECT. BUT THIS IS ABOUT AS CLOSE AS YOU'LL EVER GET.

WINNER: 2006 CHAMP!

Is it possible to fall in love with a machine? Why, yes—yes, you can.

ALMOST FAMOUS

MANUFACTURER: Gateway MODEL: FX530XT PRICE: $4,029.99 URL: www.gateway.com

REVIEW

Gateway gets kudos for trying a little harder. It's the only major PC manufacturer to actually ship an overclocked quad-core processor in its FX530XT system—and we applaud that move. However, the performance of its ATI CrossFire subsystem proves inconsistent, actually placing behind the lower-clocked Dell XPS 710 in about half the game benchmarks.

Despite lagging in the back of the pack, Gateway's PC feels more refined than Dell's impressive XPS 710. Here we have a machine whose Intel Core 2 QX6700 CPU is clocked a half-gigahertz higher than the Dell processor, and yet it runs quieter, even at full load. The Gateway costs significantly less, too (though the Dell does ship with an additional 750GB secondary hard drive. But still...).

The Achilles' heel of the FX530XT is its CrossFire graphics subsystem. Interestingly, the X1950 XTX master card uses the same cooling solution as the older X1900 XTX. Gateway notes that this is necessary because the smaller 8TX chassis wouldn't accept the longer card. This could be problematic if you want to drop in one of the even longer GeForce 8800 GTX cards as an upgrade.

The real problem, though, is the inconsistent performance. In several game tests, the Gateway posted lower scores than the Dell, which runs its CPU slower. It could simply be a driver revision or timing mismatch between the overclocked CPU and the DDR2-667 RAM that causes this slower performance. Despite these variances in scores, the FX530XT crosses the finish line intact.

Where Gateway really loses out, though, is against the boutique hot-rodders. While overclocking the Intel CPU to 3.2GHz is a bold move for a mainstream supplier, even the most conservative boutique manufacturer pushed their processors even higher. And like Dell, Gateway hasn't finished qualifying the faster GeForce 8800 GTX DirectX 10–ready graphics cards. So expect to see a more powerful flavor of this machine in the coming months.

The Gateway chassis is tantalizingly more compact than anything else in the running—and it comes with a reasonable price. If money is on your mind and there's only room under your desk for a modest mid-tower case, then consider the FX530XT.

VERDICT

- **Small, stable, quiet, and affordable.**
- **Not quite monster machine performance (due to CrossFire issues).**

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

PLAYING IT SAFE

MANUFACTURER: Dell MODEL: XPS 710 PRICE: $5,314 URL: www.dell.com

REVIEW

Walking into any room, you can't help but notice Dell's XPS 710. It may lack the Falcon Northwest system's bold paint job, but the 710 is substantial nonetheless. And we mean that in almost every sense of the word: Cancel your gym membership and just keep deadlifting this 55-plus-pound monster case.

Besides bigger muscles, the XPS 710 also offered the smoothest benchmarking experience. That's because it's one of the quietest systems. Even with a 1,000W power supply, three hard drives, and a pair of ATI X1950 XTX graphics cards running in CrossFire mode, fan noise rarely ramped up to annoying "turn that off!" levels.

And that's part of the problem. Dell took the fewest risks of any of the systems in the roundup. While some vendors pushed their systems into nosebleed territory, Dell clocked its quad-core Intel QX6700 CPU at the standard 2.66GHz. So while the Dell was trouble-free and quiet, it also posted some of the lowest benchmark scores we tested. If you don't break any records, at least you reach the checkered flag.

To be fair, Dell does expose overclocking options in the XPS 710 BIOS, but that means you have to be comfortable playing around with clock multipliers and other settings yourself—though the options to overclock are somewhat limited.

The interior of the Dell chassis is roomy. Still, the Dell left us scratching our heads. Despite the use of quad core, it seems like a last-generation system. The chipset is Nvidia's last generation 590 SLI for Intel, and the graphics are still DirectX 9.0. And we were rather bemused to see a pair of ATI cards running in CrossFire mode on an Nvidia-based motherboard.

In the end, if you're willing to tweak this system, you can probably get to 3.2GHz fairly easily, and if you're willing to wait, Dell is qualifying GeForce 8800 GTX cards. But nimbler and smaller competitors already offer more.

THE STRENGTH OF THE XPS 710 IS THE CASE DESIGN. UNFORTUNATELY, ITS OLD TECH SPELLS POOR PERFORMANCE.

VERDICT

- **Solid and stable performance from a beautiful case.**
- **Playing it safe means packing the oldest tech.**

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

TROUBLE IN THE PITS

CRASH AND BURN

When we started testing machines for the Ultimate Game Machine feature, we had nine systems—a virtual who's who of high-end boutique-PC manufacturers—representing the hopes of nine different PC companies. Each was ready to race off the starting line...but three never even made it past the pace lap.

Every vendor made a good-faith effort to ship us a rock-solid system. As we started to experience problems with some units, each manufacturer assured that they were tested, retested, burned in, tortured, and signed off on after days of abuse.

Despite all that, we had problems—serious problems—with three of the systems. Spontaneous shutdowns and reboots, numerous lockups during benchmarks—you name it. We sat on the phone for hours, double-checking cables and reseating cards.

One manufacturer issued dire warnings that some of these overclocked systems draw so much power that using a power strip can be problematic, so we should plug them directly into an outlet. In another case, we returned a system to have parts replaced, as anyone might for a warranty problem. When we got it back, it behaved even worse—it wouldn't even boot into Windows before shutting down. The CTO of one company even flew out with a bunch of parts and spent all day under our watchful eye trying to get his UGM entry stable.

In the end, three of these hot rods never made it back on the track after their extended pit stops. We're perfectly happy to review a system that finishes all our tests with a few random problems—we'll simply point out the system for its stability issues and give it a lower score. If it's not even stable enough to finish a round of testing (and some didn't come anywhere close to the finish line), we have to wave the yellow flag and get the wrecks off the track.

Frankly, that makes the overclocking success and stability of most of the other UGM entries all the more impressive. Word of mouth and reviews in magazines like ours mean everything to these boutique-PC vendors—and in an effort to win the Grand Prix of enthusiast game PC roundups, nearly every company pushed these machines to the limit, maxing out high-wattage power supplies and cutting-edge processors and motherboards. Some of them, clearly, just pushed a bit too hard.

TEST RUN: 3DMARK 2006 SCORES

GeForce 8800 GTX

MANUFACTURER: **PNY** PRODUCT: **GeForce 8800 GTX** PRICE: **$599** URL: **www.pny.com**

Review

Why would four entrants in the Ultimate Gaming Machine competition stock up their rigs with fresh-off-the-production-line hardware? Because they know these cards are ridiculously powerful. So let's not tap-dance around the obvious and just cut to the chase: The GeForce 8800 GTX is the most significant piece of graphics hardware since the original GeForce 256. Back then, haters said the GeForce 256 was too large a chip and too power-hungry a card. It's like that scene in *Major League* when an Indians fan says a home run hit was "too high." Well, those same people are about to say the same thing about the 8800 GTX. It's a huge card, no doubt, but for good reason. In our tests, this one card performed as well as two—count 'em, *two*—7900 GTX cards in SLI mode.

You can read all the stunning results throughout the feature or online at ExtremeTech.com, but when a benchmark-crusher like this comes along, you just get out of the way. The computer-killing *Company of Heroes* ran more than twice as fast as on the latest top-dog Radeon cards. We played *F.E.A.R.* at 2560x1600 resolution at an ungodly smooth 80 frames per second. How about DirectX 10? Well, we still have to wait since there are no benchmarks or games that show off the true next-gen 3D API. But at least this card is ready for the jump to DX10.

So, does this gargantuan graphics solution draw power from a nuclear reactor? No, but you'll at least want to get your hands on a 450W or better power supply with a 12V current rating of 30A. According to Nvidia, the highest it will rev is 180W for peak loads while gaming hovers around the 145W mark. Oh, and make sure that you plug in the two 6-pin connectors or you run the risk of the computer either not booting properly or crashing whenever you start a 3D-based application.

You know what? Let the people talk. Let them complain that the card is too big (and good luck trying to squeeze it into a compact case). The simple matter is, while the card is costly and beefy, it's a whole lot cheaper and smaller than two 7900 GTX boards—and if size or cost is really a concern, a leaner 8800 GTS model will sell for about $450. What's important for now is that the 8800 GTX is a must-have card.

You can't tell from this pic, but the 8800 GTX cards are huuuge!

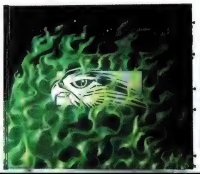
ONE 8800 OUT-PERFORMS TWO 7900GTX CARDS IN SLI CONFIGURATION!

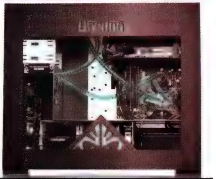
VERDICT

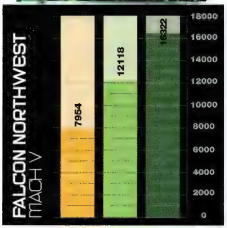
- **Incredible performance even with AA and AF jacked up. Ready for DirectX 10!**
- **As expensive as it is big.**

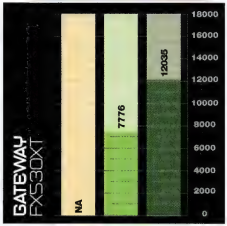
9/10 EXCELLENT

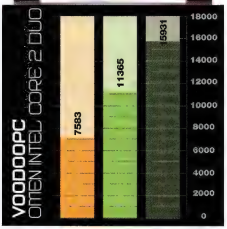
Games for Windows











Standard Test 1920x1200 4xAA 8xAF 2560x1600 4xAA 8xAF

BY THE NUMBERS

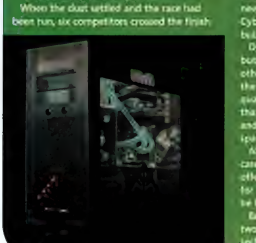
	Alienware Area-51 ALX	Dell XPS 710	Gateway FX530XT	Falcon Northwest Mach V	Gamer Infinity SLI KO	Omen Intel Core 2 Duo
CPU	Intel Core 2 Duo Extreme	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6700	QX6700 Quad-Core (overclocked)	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6700	Core 2 Duo Extreme X6800	Intel Core 2 Duo Extreme X6800
CPU Clock Speed	3.64GHz	2.66GHz	3.2GHz	3.51GHz	3.46GHz	3.8GHz
CPU Multiplier	13x	10x	12x	13x	266x13	13x
CPU Cooler	Liquid-cooled. No refill necessary.	Active-fan cooled heatsink/shroud	Custom 180W-plus design for Gateway.	Sanyo Denki watercooler. No refill necessary.	Liquid-cooled. No refill necessary.	Liquid-cooled. No refill necessary.
Memory Make	Corsair	Dual-Channel DDR2 SDRAM	PC5300 Dual-Channel DDR2 667MHz SDRAM	Corsair Dominator PC2/8888	Corsair	Corsair
Memory Quantity	4GB DDR2 800	2GB DDR2-667	2GB DDR2-667	2GB DDR2 1042	2GB DDR2 800	2 GB DDR2 1042
Memory Timings (e.g. 4-4-4-12)	4-4-4-12	5-5-5-13	5-5-5-13	4-4-4-12	5-5-5-15	5-5-5-18
Memory Clock	800MHz (6400C4)	667MHz	667MHz	800MHz	800MHz	800MHz
Hard Drive Models	2x 150GB Extreme Performance Serial ATA 1.5Gbps, 10,000rpm	2x 160 GB 10,000rpm Serial ATA, 1 x 750GB	2x 150GB 10,000rpm Serial ATA II/300	2x 150GB Western Digital Raptor 1,000rpm, 1x 300GB SATA II drive	4x 150GB Western Digital Raptor 1,000rpm, 1x 300GB SATA II drive	3x Western Digital 150GB Raptor
RAID Type	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0 (3 x 150GB)
Optical Drive 1	LaCie 16X Dual Layer DVD±R/W Drive with LightScribe	16X DVD-ROM	8x multiformat double layer DVD-RW	Sony 16x DVD-ROM	16x DVD	Pioneer DVR 111 DVD RW
Optical Drive 2	N/A	16X DVD±RW	CD-RW/DVD-ROM combo drive	Plextor P760 DVD RW	16x DVD RW	N/A
Graphics Card(s)	2x Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTX (SLI)	2x 512MB ATI Radeon X1950 XTX (CrossFire)	2x 512MB ATI Radeon X1950 XTX (CrossFire)	2x Nvidia 8800 GTX 768MB each	2x Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTX	2x Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTX in SLI
Graphics Driver Version	96.82	Catalyst 6.10	Catalyst 6.10	96.82	96.82	96.82
Soundcard	Sound Blaster X-Fi	Sound Blaster X-Fi	Sound Blaster X-Fi	Sound Blaster X-Fi	Integrated Realtek HD Audio	Creative Labs X-Fi Extreme Music
Physics Card	N/A	N/A (Ageia PhysX card additional $249)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Operating System	Windows MCE 2005 Update 2	Windows MCE 2005 Update 2	Windows MCE 2005 Update 2	Windows XP Professional SP2	Windows XP Professional SP2	Windows XP Professional SP2
Price as Tested	**$6,950**	**$5,314**	**$4,029.99**	**$7,995**	**$3,999**	**$5,700**

AND THE WINNER IS...

VOODOOPC

Nine systems, four weeks, three failed computers, and it all comes down to this—one winner, one vendor that has built the best machine on the planet.

When the dust settled and the race had been run, six competitors crossed the finish line without stability hang-ups—and each has something special going for it.



CyberPower somehow managed to keep the price of its machine down to just under $4,000—and that's with a 3.46GHz dual-core Intel CPU and two GeForce 8800 GTX cards, making it an impressive value. You might need to tack on an extra $100 or so because CyberPower omitted a dedicated soundcard, but still, four grand is a great deal.

Dell's system was striking in its design, but also striking in its conservatism. On the other hand, good ol' Gateway came out of the gate flying with an overclocked Intel quad-core CPU. Sure, it's "only" 3.2GHz, but that's air-cooled—and it's the most compact and quiet system we tested for those whose space is precious.

Alienware's William Joyce-esque H.R. Giger case design will turn heads, but the system offered curiously conservative performance for a company that prides itself on trying to be bleeding-edge.

But, in the end, it really came down to two systems: Falcon Northwest pushed new technology a bit more than VoodooPC. While both companies are shipping the spiffy new GeForce 8800 GTX graphics cards in SLI mode in these uber-rigs, Falcon Northwest gets props for shipping an overclocked Intel quad-core CPU. The boys from Oregon managed to push the quad-core to 3.51GHz, and it was rock solid in all our testing. But we found the case design to be somewhat dated, and while the custom paint job was slick, it also seemed just a little garish.

VoodooPC was a little more conservative on the CPU choice, going with a dual-core Core 2 Extreme X6800 CPU, but the Canadian company managed to push the clock frequency to 3.8GHz—and once again, it managed to do so while maintaining stability.

And so VoodooPC takes the checkered flag. It was close, to be sure, but the VoodooPC system offered excellent performance, rock-solid stability, and a case design that's elegant and refined in an almost Bang & Olufsen way. In the end, the VoodooPC system edged out the Falcon Northwest system around the margins—it was a little faster in some games and came with a sexier case. Both are excellent, but this year, the prize goes to VoodooPC.

ULTIMATE GAMING PERIPHERALS

Three hardware editors pick the best game gear

Buying the ultimate machine is a big piece of the puzzle—erm, like you still need all the tech knowledge to properly pimp your rig. Insisting with the "money is no object" streak of our PC master, Loyd Case, Jason Cross (both from Extreme Tech), and Darren Gladstone (from point of: it's-always) argued over the perfect peripherals for the job.

MONITOR

Dell's 30-inch LCD (3007WFP) has wide-screen support for the most resolution-rich applications and is found in a spec-rocket console like yours. The 3007WFP-HC version is for overclocked gamers and has a DVI-Dual Channel HDCP input for graphics.

3007WFP-HC: www.dell.com, $1,800

KEYBOARD

Darren and Jason agree that Logitech's G15 is sweetness incarnate. Glow-in-the-dark macro keys and a nifty programmable LCD display instantly elevate n00bs to 733t—at least until they start getting pwn3d in-game. Curmudgeonly Loyd swears by the no-nonsense CVT Avant Prime that, apparently, is tougher than a tank despite looking like a standard keyboard.

G15: www.logitech.com, $100
Avant Prime: www.cvtinc.com, $150

MOUSE

Ask any enemy to describe Darren Gladstone playing Battlefield 2 or CPTN Value, and a common theme you hear is that you never want Darren's mouse cursor aiming at you. Darren likes the G5 for its comfy shape and programmable weight system. Jason prefers Logitech's MX 1000 for its speedy feel. Then the contrarian ("Are you for us or against us?") Loyd likes the MX Revolution's ergonomics and high-precision tilt.

G5: www.logitech.com, $72
MX Revolution: www.logitech.com, $100

SPEAKERS

Jason prefers Logitech's Z-5450 Digital wireless 5.1 speakers. His reasoning: The digital decoder box allows him to plug in console game systems as well. But decoder boxes are a little superfluous. Loyd and Darren are all about getting Creative, and the GigaWorks S750 is the Cadillac with chrome-spinner dubs of PC speakers. Yeah, it's wired, but if you're planting your rig in one place, this 7.1 system is the only choice.

Z-5450 Digital: www.logitech.com, $500
GigaWorks S750: www.creative.com, $500

HEADSET

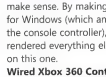
Picking the perfect headset is tough—and nobody could agree on what makes up the heart of one. Do you use a good headset with a built-in mic? Does it simulate 7.1 stereo? Do you care how comfy you look with those on? Darren continues to appreciate the generally fantastic-all-'round creature comforts of looking like a sick Sith lord while playing pew-pew-pew-shooting-a-mechanical-bastard-in-the-face games. Loyd, Valerie (you so say NEVER!), and you want a mic on one. When needs to talk to other people, anyhow?

Sennheiser HD 25-1: www.estacore.com, $118
NOMAD: www.sennheiserusa.com, $279

CONTROLLER

The perfect controller for PC gaming is...wait for it...a *console controller*. It's just crazy enough to make sense. By making the Xbox 360 Controller for Windows (which amounts to XP drivers for the console controller), Microsoft has pretty much rendered everything else obsolete. No arguments on this one.

Wired Xbox 360 Controller for Windows: www.xbox.com, $40



STEERING WHEEL

If you're the steering-wheel and pedals-for-a-NASCAR-racer sort (except you're a controller), you'll get the Thrustmaster T500 RS. A belt-driven wheel and force-feedback pedal system with faux-leather grip and metal paddle shifters are featured inside. Enclosed 6000 systems: www.enclosed.com, starts at $1,100

FLIGHTSTICK

Before flying away to the danger zone in *MS Flight Simulator X*, Loyd plugs in his Saitek X52 Pro stick and rudder pedals with those slick on-board LCD panels. Then he throws on some aviator shades and cranks up the Kenny Loggins. We don't ask.

X52 Pro Flight Control System: www.saitekusa.com, $200

WIRELESS GAMING ROUTER

Routers may not seem sexy, but they're vital. If you're cooking up more than one machine on deck in your pad, D-Link's DIR-655 is a great 802.11n/g router that has all the nifty parties (prioritization and username-linking stuff, in English) covered, and the wireless-N-enabled range isn't much.

DIR-4300: dlink.com, $150

[GEEKED AT BIRTH.]

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BUGGIN' OUT

One gamer formally resigns as beta tester

COLUMN

Once upon a time, my wife and I bought a new refrigerator. At the store, and in the brochure, we were told of many exciting and wonderful features our refrigerator would have: a water dispenser and ice maker on the front door, slide-out shelves for easy access to food, digital temperature controls. When we brought the refrigerator home and plugged it in, however, things were not quite as we had been promised. The water that came out of the dispenser was brown. The slide-out shelves jammed halfway open. And the digital temperature controls weren't included at all, though there was a note in the packaging saying that they were sorry about that and they'd deliver that component to us as soon as they were done making it.

OK, so I made all that up. Duh. Who buys refrigerators? I've had the same one since, like, I was born. And whatever the hell that green lumpy thing is on the middle shelf has been there since then, too. The idea here was to plant an image in your head of a faulty product. A dud. A lemon. Because, in this case, you know exactly what we would do next: We would return it and get our money back. We would not be patient and wait for the company to get its act together. We would not troll message boards looking for fixes. We would not take on part of the blame ourselves for having too high expectations. Because why should we? We pay our money, we expect a product that works as advertised. Period. The end.

I bring all of this up because, as we all know, in the wonderful world of PC gaming, things aren't quite so simple. This month I played—or, I guess I should say tried to play—three new superhyped PC games in a row: *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*, *Battlefield 2142*, and *Neverwinter Nights 2*. In every single case, I encountered enough problems—slowdowns, crash bugs, stuttering—to put a damper on my experience to the point of quitting the game and/or uninstalling it entirely, because the initial impression was such a turnoff that I just didn't want anything more to do with it.

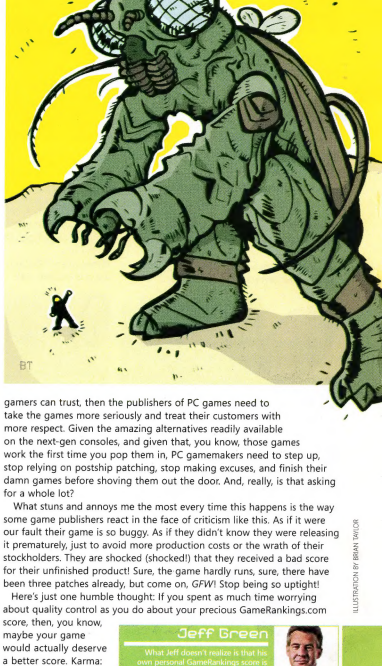
In the case of *Neverwinter Nights 2*, I had to keep playing because I was reviewing it for this magazine (see page 80). But the other two games, which I was just playing "for fun"? Tell you what: Next time you want me to have that kind of fun, please just come to my house and smash in my head with a crowbar instead. It'll be cheaper and over much quicker.

Is that harsh? Well, check this out. Desperate to fix *Dark Messiah's* horrendous slowdowns, I scrounged around online until I came across this fix:

"Right-click the shortcut to the game and add on the target exe line +mat_forcemanagedtextureintohardware 0."

Question: In what universe am I living in where I suddenly have to do that kind of crap just to get my game to run? Answer: The universe of Suck. I'm sorry, but I am neither a beta tester nor a programmer. If you want me to code your game for you, then how about you pay me, instead of the other way around?

Seriously, this has to stop. I'm thrilled that Microsoft is gung-ho with its Games for Windows initiative, and I'm happy this magazine is a part of it. But if Games for Windows is to be taken seriously as a real platform that gamers can trust, then the publishers of PC games need to take the games more seriously and treat their customers with more respect. Given the amazing alternatives readily available on the next-gen consoles, and given that, you know, those games work the first time you pop them in, PC gamemakers need to step up, stop relying on postship patching, stop making excuses, and finish their damn games before shoving them out the door. And, really, is that asking for a whole lot?



What stuns and annoys me the most every time this happens is the way some game publishers react in the face of criticism like this. As if it were our fault their game is so buggy. As if they didn't know they were releasing it prematurely, just to avoid more production costs or the wrath of their stockholders. They are shocked (shocked!) that they received a bad score for their unfinished product! Sure, the game hardly runs, sure, there have been three patches already, but come on, *GFW!* Stop being so uptight!

Here's just one humble thought: If you spent as much time worrying about quality control as you do about your precious GameRankings.com score, then, you know, maybe your game would actually deserve a better score. Karma: It's a real bitch.

● **Jeff Green**

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

Jeff Green

What Jeff doesn't realize is that his own personal GameRankings score is 3.2. Ask when he's getting a patch at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com

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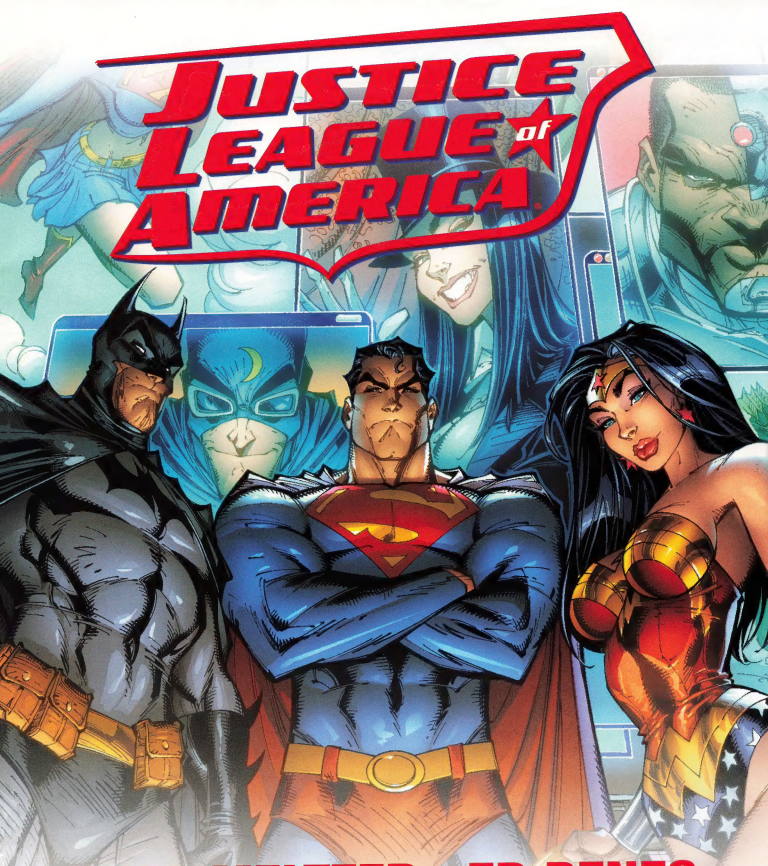

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